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## THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPERSED WORK TEAMS ON JOB ATTITUDES

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*With the increase in technology and pace of communication in a global business economy, organizations are adopting geographically dispersed business models that leverage a series of scattered work arrangements designed to enhance efficiency and cost-effectiveness. These arrangements include work teams that consist of agents who work in a traditional office but also employees who work from a home or satellite office. This qualitative study investigated perceived impact of geographic proximity to the office on job attitudes. Communication theory informed the framework of this ethnographic study and qualitative interviews. Results indicated that members of a dispersed team adopt a broad definition of their workgroup and decline in their motivation to maintain, or pursue, more intimate relationships. Findings also show that dispersed workgroups had lower levels of organizational identity and trust. This study found that proximity and its impact on job attitudes was not as important as other organizational variables, such as strength of communication and the presence of leadership.*

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary organizations, seeking both competitive and sustainable operating models, are increasingly adopting work arrangements in which teams consist both of employees who work in a traditional office and those that work from a home or satellite office. Although the pace at which companies are deploying this at-home workforce is rising, there is limited understanding or consistent research around the impact these virtual arrangements have on the workgroup and collective organization (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Cordery & Soo, 2008; Golden, 2006). The following study adds to this emerging field of knowledge by exploring the influence physical proximity plays on job attitudes within dispersed work groups.

#### Importance of the Study

This specific study is important, not only because it adds to the growing body of research on the topic, but because it adds an additional dimension of job attitudes and the long-term advantages, or disadvantages, of such an arrangement. Bailey & Kurland (2002) stated in their review of teleworking that empirical research, to date, has been largely unsuccessful in identifying and explaining what happens when people telework.

Analysis of relevant communication theory and contemporary scholarship not only begin to frame the perspective by which this situation will be viewed throughout the research, but it also begins to outline the case for conducting a naturalistic inquiry into the effects of proximity in work teams. A common starting point when discussing dispersed work teams is the inherent difference between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Both face-to-face and CMC have their advantages and individuals may certainly prefer one method to the other, but given their dependence

on CMC for both developing and maintaining relationships, it is important to understand how these methods are functionally different.

The *Media Richness Theory* (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987) is useful in understanding the capacity that a medium has for perceived communication effectiveness. The importance of this theory to this study seems relatively obvious: dispersed work teams are forced, in situations with increased uncertainty, to use media channels that lack *richness*, or, are not capable of reducing the ambiguity in the message. Specific use of the word *richness*, as it refers to relational progress, raises question around the impact that proximity can play on communication within a dispersed team. If teams are limited in media richness, because of their proximity, then the *Social Penetration Theory* (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987) provides evidence that relational development will be slowed. In terms of job attitudes, relational isolation can manifest itself in certain job attitudes that would be observable across a sample group.

The premise of the *Social Identity Theory* (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005) is grounded in the claim that a group "exists to the extent that its members have a sense of shared identity" (p. 102). This theory seems especially useful in understanding how traditional team structure blends, or fails to blend, in a dispersed environment. There is potential that dispersed work groups feel a reduced sense of team given the significant difference in the ways they communicate and identify with the organization. In fact, they may find more in common with other remote agents or agents in the organization (not directly on their workgroup). It becomes important, then, to understand how proximity is impacting job attitudes relating to organizational identity given the popularity of the model.

The communication theories outlined provide a preliminary understanding as to the potential problems that could exist within a dispersed working model. To date, few studies have explored the effects of such a work model on

job attitudes within the workplace; yet, the model continues to grow in popularity.

## LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Allen (1977) was one of the first to demonstrate the link between work groups and proximity. He found that communication between face-to-face co-workers dropped rapidly as physical distance increased. In contemporary organizations virtual teams have become common place as, one, required technology has become readily available to the average consumers, and, two, there is sufficient understanding as to how the technology is used (Agres, C., Edberg, D., & Igbaria, 2001). Contemporary research on the subject has provided an abundance of definitions to help understand what these arrangements are (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). What is limited, however, and what this research intends to add to, is research about what happens when these arrangements are used. The following literature background provides a synthesis of available knowledge about proximity and job attitudes.

### Trust

Virtual teams are usually characterized by low levels of trust and information sharing when compared to traditional teams (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2006). For this research, trust is defined as the extent to which an individual believes their best interests are valued, the extent to which an individual perceives his/her coworkers have the knowledge and ability to do their job, and, last, the extent to which an individual perceives that his/her coworkers will act with integrity (Sobel Lojeski & Reilly, 2008, p. 54). In a virtual structure, the components for trust-building behavior are more difficult to assume because of the lack of physical presence (Crossman & Lee-Kelley, 2004). Simply put, increased physical proximity only enhances uncertainty around everyone's contribution to the team - uncertainty which is more difficult to reduce in a dispersed environment (Crossman & Lee-Kelley, 2004).

### Knowledge Transfer and Socialization

The transfer of knowledge can be complicated by a variety of factors and job attitudes, particularly when electronic media is used as the primary means of communication (Hasty, Massey, & Brown, 2006). This social, and often informal, process of communicating and observing represents a primary way by which knowledge is obtained and is disrupted in a dispersed environment (Workman, 2007). Contemporary research indicates that infrequent face-to-face meetings and dispersion across space may reduce traditional means of getting relational information and cause a sense of uncertainty about a person's position in the group (Hakonen & Lipponen, 2008). This knowledge transfer 'gap' exists around development

opportunities, and to the extent that remote employees become isolated, there is fear that being off-site and out-of-sight will limit opportunities for promotions and organizational rewards. Proximity and knowledge transfer, as it relates to job attitudes, also has impact in the area of socialization. For example, some of the cues that pull employees together in more traditional organizational settings include dress codes, shared language, shared organizational routines, and other organizational identifiers such as organization charts and placards (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999). These socializing aspects simply do not have the same effect, or are non-existent, in a computer-mediated environment.

### Identity

While identity itself represents more than a simple job attitude, organizational identification represents the psychological tie binding employees and the organization—a tie that exists even when employees are dispersed (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999). While telecommuting may make organizational identity all the more important, it also makes it more difficult to sustain (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006).

It is through communication with others that we express and identify our belongingness to various collectives, assess the reputation and image of those collectives, that various identities are made know to us, and the social costs and rewards of maintaining various identities are revealed (Scott, 2007). However, in a virtual context, communication and cues that traditionally create organizational identification are not as recognizable (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007). Thus, telecommuting, by changing the social, physical, and physiological context of work, may affect content and strength of organizational related identities (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Research has shown these dispersed team members, then, are less committed and do not have a shared culture or organizational identity because of the inherently different values (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007; Leonardi, Treem, & Jackson, 2010).

### Engagement

While identity speaks to how agents describe themselves in terms of the organization, engagement could be described as the level of commitment an agent might hold, which, again, has a large impact on their job attitudes. Individuals who used greater levels of computer-mediated communication reported lower levels of positive affect and commitment to the organization (Johnson, Bettenhausen, & Gibbons, 2009). Increased feelings of social isolation also resulted in lower levels of job satisfaction (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Contemporary research in this area hinges, quite often, around the richness of communication that takes place within computer-mediated teams. This lack of media richness (i.e. limited exposure to body language, gestures,

and voice tone) increases the likelihood that communication will be misunderstood and, thus, resulting in lack of engagement (Roebuck, Brock, & Moodie, 2004; De Phillis & Furumo, 2007; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Furumo, 2009).

### FOCUS OF THE STUDY

A review of relevant communication theory and contemporary scholarship around geographically dispersed work teams provides sufficient evidence to warrant additional exploration into the potential impacts of dispersed work teams on job attitudes. At the core of this problem is a subtle, yet fundamental, shift in the way agents interact within and across the organization. As individuals begin to change the way they communicate, they also change their perceptions of their own organizational identity. Accordingly, the driving research question at hand, and what served as a guide for this research, is:

**RQ:** What are the perceived impacts of geographical proximity on job attitudes?

### METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic qualitative research design was implemented to explore the role of geographic proximity on job attitudes. The researcher, familiar with the cultural norms associated with the sample, contributed to the overall trustworthiness and dependability of the study by recognizing: observations outside the scope of research, data that should be included, and data required for further exploration (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002). Additional procedures implemented to contribute to the integrity of the study involved a systematic process, multiple raters, and critical self-reflection throughout the research. Central to the credibility of this study was the degree to which research participants' viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood and portrayed by the researcher. While it is strongly believed that similar environmental and organizational constraints would bring about similar results, the findings are meant to lend understanding to this unique group and arrangement ((Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002).

#### Sample

Purposive sampling was implemented to select a rich sample and also develop a comparison group. These unique sample groups differed in their degree of dispersion from a traditional office. Population elements within these two groups were representative of their general population, and any errors of judgment in the selection tended to counterbalance one another (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002, p. 187). The researcher, in the role of ethnographer, contributed to identifying the sample of interest contributing

to the richest narrative feedback. The ethnographer's prolonged engagement, persistent observation, referential adequacy, and triangulation of the sample contributed to the credibility of the study as finite intricacies were explored with thick description (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

This research was conducted within an inbound contact center for a large financial institution. From this sample group 11 ethnographic interviews were conducted. Five interviews were completed with participants who worked from a home office, and the other six with participants who worked in a support office that was intentionally distanced from the main headquarters. The sample group comprised of eight females and three males, and the entire group had an average work experience of 3.8 years in their current role. None of the agents had been in the home office environment for more than 18 months.

#### Data Gathering and Analysis

A set of interview questions, derived from the preliminary work done around communication theory and current literature, were created to explore existing themes in terms of proximity and job attitudes, but also to draw out attitudes inherent within the work arrangement. While data collection occurred at fixed times during this research, the analysis of the data was best described as constant, ongoing, and an iterative emergent process. Within twenty-four hours of each interview a complete transcript was created and copied into a database for open, axial, and selective coding, dissecting and breaking the data down into the smallest pieces of information possible (Erlandson et al., p. 117). Next, these pieces of information were used to conduct emergent category designation, coupled with the observations made by the researcher outside of formal interviews, in which each unit was grouped with similar answers or themes (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002). As new themes presented themselves, the interview questions used were changed in order to account for new findings – thus, maintaining the exploratory and reflexive nature of the research.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes, some consistent with themes found in the literature review, emerged from the qualitative content analysis:

- Proximity and its impact on relational development
- Perception of distance
- Team boundaries
- Engagement
- Knowledge transfer and socialization
- Organizational perspective and identity
- Trust



## Proximity and Relational Development

Reduced proximity, more specifically a lack of physical visibility, had a clear impact on the speed by which relationships were developed in a dispersed arrangement. Participants, and not just those working outside of the office, spoke often about seeing their peers, and at the same time, being seen as a means of developing personal relationships:

**PARTICIPANT #6:** I think that being remote makes it an obstacle. Because you don't have that face-to-face time. It is a lot easier to convey trust and willingness to help when you can look them in the face, versus over the phone.

Participants acknowledged that face-to-face relationships they held prior to working remotely had, in fact, digressed from the point at which proximity was introduced. Others acknowledged that the relationships they have now, that were formed while working in the office, simply would not exist:

**PARTICIPANT #7:** It helps that we knew each other before we went remote, if we didn't know each other that might not be the case.

That does not mean, however, that all relationships occurring or being maintained in a computer-mediated fashion were becoming non-existent. While regression had taken place between people who had previously worked face-to-face, most acknowledged healthy, albeit impersonal, interactions with those they had never met (in person).

## Perception of Distance

The perception of distance, and thus the affect on the one's job attitude, was in many ways tied directly to variables in the participant's job function and work environment. This type of *relational proximity* or *functional proximity* is relevant to this study for the reason that, often, job attitudes traditionally associated with increased physical proximity are, in fact, not a product of distance, but, rather, universal variables present in the work environment.

## Time and Job Function

As was mentioned in the description of the sample, the participants selected for this research work in an inbound contact center. The very nature of their role, in and of itself, had more impact on their perception of proximity, and subsequent attitudes, than their own dispersed work arrangement. Participants referred to a lack of time when they discussed developing relationships or socializing:

**PARTICIPANT #9:** For me my most frustrating experiences are being tied to my desk or to my phone all the time... And we're tied to that desk

and we have to follow a schedule that's set for us to the minute. And we're told what time to go to break, when to go to lunch, when to go to break again, and it is, um, very little flexibility in the job. It is just not freedom at all.

Often it was for these reasons that individuals commented they had chosen to work from home, saying that they felt like they were unable to interact with anyone in the office. Working from home, they determined, would be no different.

**PARTICIPANT #7:** Actually, I do prefer to see people face-to-face, it is one of the things that was difficult about taking this job. However, I just love being at home. I mean, you can get the same thing done. I mean, if you are in the office and on the phone, or at home and on the phone, to me it is not any different. Even if you are on site there's not that many people to look at face-to-face, and those are people that need help from you, I don't need help from them.

Those participants who placed a high value on social interactions and took the time to develop social relationships, often at the expense of their job performance, had a less favorable outlook of working from home or increased virtualness.

## Leadership

The presence of effective leadership – specifically someone in a position of organizational authority – seemed to be an over-riding factor on the job attitudes associated with geographical dispersion. These references came up, most often, around the subject of engagement, and the direct Supervisor was either a catalyst in overcoming perceived distance or creating the perception of increased distance:

**PARTICIPANT #8:** She's always trying to make sure we're doing stuff together.

**PARTICIPANT #2:** Right now our team, I feel personally, is divided because [Supervisor] has divided it and he's made that point. This is the E-Rep group, this is my team. You know what I mean? You feel the disconnection between the two groups, it is there, it is obvious, and it is present."

**PARTICIPANT #5:** When I have a leader or someone that I report to that I genuinely and truly care about, that I know cares about me, then I work harder for that person, naturally. Because I care what you think, I care what that person feels like they are getting out of me, and I know that I can be more self motivated, and when everybody reports

to someone who is so absent, you lose, I don't know, they kind of decline in your list of priorities. I don't know.

This last quote, and the use of the word 'absent', has some significance when you consider this participant works on-site and their Supervisor is just a few cubicles away. These quotes, and the use of phrases like 'together', 'divided', 'absent', indicate that the perceptions of proximity on job attitudes can be lessened, or heightened, with leadership techniques. To the extent that these obstacles are overcome and the group is encouraged to interact and develop, the aspect of physical proximity became a minor factor in the overall dynamic. This idea will be discussed at length later in this paper, but it is important to note that this is not necessarily something that was considered during the preparation of this research, namely during the literature review, rather, as the qualitative method progressed, was a something that became central to the findings.

### Team Boundaries and Proximity

Participants spoke to shifting or dynamic team boundaries when it came to remote or dispersed arrangements, and in nearly every case participants acknowledged they were a part of a number of teams that varied in size and purpose. Participants' collective definitions of team seemed to extend beyond traditional and hierarchical methods of classification and often had little regard for geographic barriers. In general, participants did not use their remote standing as a basis in identifying their team. Instead, they referred to existing teams that extended across space, across the organization, often consisting of individuals at a similar organizational level.

### Engagement

A number of questions directly inquired as to the level of engagement participants felt for their team, and the collective answers seem to point to high levels of engagement at the smaller team levels, with reduced levels at the broader, organizational levels. Here are several participants' answers that develop this trend:

**PARTICIPANT #7:** I feel connected with my Remote Team. With [Supervisor's] Team I feel connected because we do stuff. You know, it is cool. My Senior Team, uh, I feel a little less connected. And that may be on my part, too, because I've not pushed to be in there.

**PARTICIPANT #7:** But right now, I think, I feel disconnected from the Senior Team itself because I have no idea who they are... I'm still kind of working my way into the Senior role... it is hard because everyone is over there.

One theme became clear, and that was as we move beyond one's immediate team, where engagement seems higher, and spread out across the greater organization (increased proximity) this engagement level begins to drop.

### Knowledge Transfer and Socialization

The majority of participants seemed to prefer informal channels, such as face-to-face and instant messaging, that were most conversational (which includes response time). The determining factor in most cases, as to which method a participant might use, was clearly one's degree of virtualness: those in the office relied heavily, in most cases, on simply poking a head around or over the cubicle, while those outside the office preferred instant messenger. Participants, overwhelmingly, avoided formal, static sources of information, which, from an organizational perspective were the preferred channels of distribution. Knowledge transfer, just like relational development, was dependent on a number of factors besides physical proximity, and the attitudes exhibited in this research seem to point towards participants incorporating the richest channels possible. Given the levels of uncertainty surrounding performance and the unique job function observed in this sample group, this draw towards mediums higher in richness seems appropriate.

### Socialization

For a number of participants, especially those with a high degree of dispersion, socialization did occur regularly outside of work, or through communication channels not associated with the organization (social media). When it did occur at work these interactions were mostly done over the phone, but as one participant pointed out that was not acceptable:

**PARTICIPANT #1:** I got scolded for spending too much time on calls and you know, how have you been or what have you been doing, before we got down to business, so we're not doing that as much anymore... People just move on and do what they want to do – I think people just move on.

And for those working from home this presented an obvious dilemma:

**PARTICIPANT #1:** You know, there's just no conversation on breaks, on lunches, there used to be a of interactions during those down times, it doesn't happened during team meetings – so there's, there's no real interaction outside of business that happens when you're there. When I'm on break I'm away from my desk I'm down here, I'm not in the lunchroom or hall or whatever, and same with lunch, I'm not having any social interaction with them.

As was already stated, proximity has played a role in the degree to which individuals have developed relationships, and this is certainly another factor directly influenced by increased proximity.

### Organizational Perspective and Identity

Participants spoke fondly of the organization with multiple participants referring to it as a “family”. A majority of participants seemed to struggle, however, in articulating their identity, and to some extent their role, within the greater organization. This subject was handled in a two-step fashion during the interviews as participants were asked to define two things: how other team members would describe them and, then, to define their unique role on the team. The answers were often vague and short when compared to their formal descriptions of what they do on a daily basis. Participants acknowledged that the identity that had been created was consistent with the one they had attempted to build, however, that does not seem to make much sense given the answers from Participant #9 (“old” and “I talk too much”) and Participant #3 (“loud” and “bitchy”). Common in each of these answers was the use of phrases such as “probably” as well as generic answers such as “nice” and “friendly”. These answers do little to distinguish or describe the unique identity that each individual possesses on the team.

When asked about the role they played in the organization participants seemed to struggle and their answers shifted from describing interpersonal dynamics to describing a functional position within the organization.

**PARTICIPANT #2:** My role is very, my role is written on my paycheck. It says this is what you are, this is what you do.

**PARTICIPANT #5:** My role is kind of little, I wouldn't be missed if I was gone. I mean, I'm pretty low on the totem pole.

These participants work in an environment in which communication at a peer and organizational level is severely impacted by physical and relational proximity, and as a result participants struggle to speak to an identity that is not, based on the type of communication they take part in, geared towards their role as a production element.

### Trust

A majority of participants demonstrated lower levels of trust when speaking about the collective organization, however, they openly talked about higher levels of trust with their direct work teams (despite proximity).

**PARTICIPANT #5:** Just like maybe some of the management, my personal boss, I don't so much trust that he – I trust that he has my back, I don't trust that he's going to work hard on my behalf to help me.

There is certainly more proximity, both physical and perceived, and uncertainty that one must navigate when they speak about the larger organization, so it seems expected that levels of trust would drop. This type of statement is not unique to a remote environment, but does demonstrate a job attitude in which the perception of distance exists.

### Communication and Trust

One of the consistent themes in the arena of trust that emerged from these interviews was the connection between trust, communication, and proximity. Proximity only heightens the necessity for effective communication given the lack of opportunity many staff have to speak or observe the organization's actions. A specific example was mentioned by a majority of participants – that of an organization wide project that included a rollout to its customer base. Here are the comments received about this launch and the subsequent interactions between front line staff and their management:

**PARTICIPANT #1:** I was asked to share my experiences, and I'm doing so, and the door is being shut in my face. That was a little disheartening; I was looking for another job.

**PARTICIPANT #7:** What really, really, really burned my cookies wasn't how long, wasn't the whole IVR issue, but the fact that they wouldn't listen to us when we told them it wasn't working. It is almost like they were patting us on the head and saying, “Oh no, it will be better, go play.” And that's, really, burned my cookies!

These remarks point to a problem, not with the application or the launch, but a lack of communication that was occurring and perpetuated the attitudes of isolation and trust towards the organization.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The collective data gathered from this study points to the obvious influence that proximity plays in the formation of attitudes on dispersed teams; however, what was rather unexpected is that ‘physical distance’ is just one of a number of important constraints that comprise, or influence, the proximity that an individual may experience.



### Proximity and Team Identity

Participants in this study spoke to difficulty creating or maintaining personal and professional relationships, despite a number of informal communication channels, when it came to increased physical dispersion. In this case it seems that physical proximity, despite the communication channels available, is perceived as simply too high a hurdle in creating and maintaining personal relationships, and as a result, it is easier to maintain fewer deep relationships. A number of participants, in fact, admitted that relationships they currently held could only have come about because they, at one time, were close in proximity. The argument could also be made that given the uncertainty that exists in an agent's environment, considering the lack of richness in communication, comparison levels have remained the same, but the communication environment simply does not allow for relationships to progress towards greater levels of intimacy.

### Proximity and Organizational Identity

In this study, participants overwhelmingly identified with, and supported, the value statements of the organization, but they struggled as a whole to define their role in the collective organization. Even at a team level, and this supports the hypothesis that proximity empowers agents to identify with that highest point of commonality, participants struggled to elaborate as to, one, how they would be described by their peers, and two, the role they played on their team. Descriptions were often vague and rather cliché, even optimistic in nature. At the organizational level, however, they answers and tone changed considerably. Participants spoke about being in a "production" role, commented that their role was minimal or insignificant, and even indicated they would not be missed. These comments, in light of their high praise for the organization, seem to indicate that as the questions shifted to the organizational level they moved outside that point of highest commonality. Participants were now talking about an organization they loved working for, but could hardly identify with.

The explanation to this problem seems to lie in the simple definition, and relational qualities, of identity. While conversations are taking place a team or department level, the dialogue happening at, or about, the greater organization and the role they place seems inadequate given the level of proximity. There are a number of variables besides proximity at play here, but just as proximity acts as an impediment to relational development, so to does it act as a barrier organizationally speaking. Increased proximity can lead to an agent feeling lost in the big picture, and because of this they feel expendable and simply as a production component.

### Proximity and Trust

The collective research supports the notion that a lack of physical presence has an impact on how trust is built or maintained (Crossman & Lee-Kelley, 2004). Increased proximity and perceived distance begin to isolate the agent from the rest of the organization, and it is within this space where paranoia, doubt, and fear to manifest. While there seemed to be little question that the organization was open and honest with its membership base, a series of events, unique to each Participant, slowly led to this reduced level of trust. Based on the results of this study, there is a strong case to be made that this lack of trust, across many organizations, has a direct connection to proximity, both physical and perceived, within organizations.

### Proximity and Job Function

This section is the first of three that identifies organizational variables closely associated with the success or failure of dispersed teams. Or, in other words, factors that influence the perception of distance. The first of these factors is job function, and more specifically the amount of *relational proximity* that is created because of job function. Given of the high degree of relational proximity built into the environment, many participants held an attitude that viewed socialization as something that could not, or should not occur. Participants were simply too busy, or too preoccupied, to form meaningful or functional relationships. This type of *operational distance* is a factor in exposing what some researchers refer to as virtual distance (Sobel Lojeski & Reilly, 2008, p. 33).

In certain environments, then, such as a contact center, where staff are constantly engaged in a task or activity, physical proximity will do little to further attitudes already produced by relational proximity. In this instance it seems appropriate to define proximity, as some are beginning to do, not on a solely physical sense, but in reviewing a number of parameters that enhance feelings of proximity, whether they are real or perceived.

### Proximity and Communication

The second variable that has incredible potential in influencing the job attitudes built around proximity is communication. Throughout the data collection process the importance of communication became very apparent: dispersed teams demand consistent, reliable, authentic, and conversational communication channels. Some may, in fact, propose that this is no different for teams that exist with minimal proximity, but given the physical limitations for the relationships to occur, dispersed work teams demand levels of communication that have not been necessary in organizations until proximity was introduced. Whether it is trust, organizational roles, or the definition of team, team members require communication to supplement the tangible,



often informal or unconscious, exchanges that occur within close proximity. Participants in this study acknowledged, though, that communicating across proximity was more difficult than simply looking around a cubicle wall, and this perceived work, along with a lack of richness, often reduces the number of messages being received. The Media Richness Theory (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987), which was introduced earlier in this research, is one perspective that can be used to understand why this exists. This reduction in communication begins to isolate and hinder a dispersed work force from developing healthy organizational identities.

### Proximity and Leadership

As with job function and communication, leadership was an important variable in determining the impact of proximity on job attitudes. For the sake of this research the term *leadership* is used as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2010). Many leaders in today's organizations are, to some extent, invisible, in this new environment and find themselves terribly inadequate to cope with the changing landscape. The foremost challenge is to not allow technology to increase the feelings of proximity that already exist – as was evident at times in this study. The virtual leader then is responsible for maintaining a level of dialogue and communication with dispersed agents that promotes identity at a personal and organizational level. How, though, should this be done in a virtual context when leaders are advised to “get close to people if we're going to communicate” (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 100)? Foremost, it requires a process of innovation and reinvention. In light of a dynamic environment that is modern organizations, leaders must constantly adapt in order to find effective ways or reaching an increasingly dispersed workforce. Second, leaders must balance their isolation with a desire to listen and to be heard. Finally, the virtual leader must understand the types of ecological changes associated with proximity and not attempt to change them, but rather ensure that in the midst of this evolution that true community and humanist values are nurtured.

### SUMMARY

Based on the research presented in this study there is little reason to believe that dispersed work arrangements cannot provide an environment by which healthy job attitudes are constructed. Participants demonstrated a desire to use highly virtual channels to communicate, and advances in technology, such as video conferencing, only promise to add some richness to these channels. Participants indicated more dynamic team boundaries, but also spoke to the fact that they were able to maintain, across space, those relationships that mattered most to them (both personally and professionally). Lastly, participants were able to

identity with the greater department, and collectively spoke to the team dynamic that existed.

Proximity and its influence in shaping job attitudes is highly dependent on the job function and various dynamics within the organization. Leaders must adapt to a changing work environment, one that still demands they get close to their agents, but this environment now includes miles of physical and relational proximity. That being said, organizations should focus less time and energy in the development of work-from-home programs that place attention on technical execution and strategy, and spend more time in leadership and communication development, as these aspects will create a foundation and a culture in which proximity does not have to remain, or become, a barrier to healthy job attitudes.

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