

# Enablers of Virtual Communication and Collaboration in Global R& D Teams

## A Qualitative Case Study

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## **ENABLERS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION IN GLOBAL R & D TEAMS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**

### **Abstract**

Previous research tends to overemphasize frictions, cultural clashes and communication breakdowns in virtual teams. The author aims at exploring positive aspects of cross-cultural collaboration and identifying some of the conditions underlying trust-building, employee motivation and team effectiveness.

Whereas much research on virtual teams has taken its point of departure in Western MNCs and primarily addressed headquarter concerns, this case study of a Danish MNC's Indian R & D site gives voice to Indian managers and employees and explores through semi-structured interviews and observations how they perceive communication and collaboration within multinational and multicultural R & D teams, and how they try to find common ground.

Based on the interviews accounts, there are several enablers of virtual team collaboration: advanced information and communication technology facilitated virtual communication, and high English-language proficiency among the engineers at different R & D sites made dialogue and knowledge exchange feasible. Moreover, team members shared a strong professional identity as engineers and technicians, and they displayed a strong identification with the MNC, a world leader in the wind power industry.

Perceived national differences in leadership and communication style played a minor role, maybe because the majority of Indian managers and employees had previous experience working in other Western MNCs. Some of the Indian managers and employees were even able

to act as boundary-spanners between headquarters and the Indian R&D site due to their study and work experiences in other business environments.

Culture courses that introduced the Danish and Indian team members to a North European communication and management style, and to an Indian respectively, were introduced on the initiative of the Danish managing director, who - in contrast to the HR department - recognized the importance of facilitating the virtual teamwork through cultural awareness training. Suggestions for further cultural learning processes are given.

**Keywords:**

Virtual teams, global R & D collaboration, boundary-spanners, cultural awareness and sensitivity, lack of HR support

# **ENABLERS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION IN GLOBAL R & D TEAMS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**

## **Introduction**

Research of multicultural, geographically dispersed teams has largely focused on barriers related to cultural differences. Geographically distributed teams are expected to be more fragile than co-located teams (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005), due to difficult conditions for trust-building, commitment and conflict-resolution when face-to face communication is limited. Trust-building often requires longer periods of collaboration, and in some cultural contexts team members typically invest considerable effort into developing a close social relationship before initiating any task-related work (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Research indicates that multicultural teams are also expected to experience substantial challenges when communicating and collaborating across time zones, cultures and national borders; based on ethnocentric thinking some teams construct strong 'us versus them' dichotomies (Cramton & Hinds, 2005) that hinder information sharing, collaboration and joint generation of ideas. Virtual multinational teams may also encounter difficulties in managing conflicts (Glinow, Shapiro & Brett, 2004) and communicating around emotional issues in a lingua franca (Harzing & Feely, 2008). Different communication styles and preferences – that is, implicit communication in Asian high-context cultures and more explicit communication in North European low-context cultures (Hall, 1976) – may also add to the complexity of virtual teamwork across cultures. Moreover, there may be an incongruence of work-related values within a multinational team, and team members at different locations may have developed significantly different work practices. According to previous research on multicultural teams, all of these differences may cause problems and compromise the performance of multicultural teams and the outcome of collaboration across borders (Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt & Jonsen, 2010).

However, as Stahl, Mäkelä, Zander and Maznevski (2010) observed, previous research may have been biased towards studying the negative effects of team diversity and thus overemphasized the problems and barriers in virtual team collaboration, focusing on ‘cultural frictions’, ‘culture clashes’ and ‘communication breakdowns’. Using a lens of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003), Stahl, Mäkelä, Zander and Maznevski (2010) draw attention to the idea that cultural team diversity and cultural differences can also be an asset. They encourage scholars to explore the positive aspects of cross-cultural dynamics and identify some of the conditions underlying trust-building, team effectiveness, employee motivation and job satisfaction as well as processes leading to increased creativity

Much of the research of geographically distributed teams referred to above has taken its point of departure in US American and European MNCs and primarily addressed headquarter concerns with managing employees at distant locations. In this case study we will look deeper into how Indian managers and employees at the Indian R & D site experience the intercultural communication and collaboration with team members at other locations. Observations and accounts from the Indian engineers interviewed during a visit to the MNC’s R&D hub in Chennai gave the impression that virtual team collaboration was fairly smooth. This encouraged further exploration of the specific conditions and practices that seem to have fostered benefits in this specific case.

This paper will address the following questions:

- How did Indian managers and employees at a Danish MNC’s R&D hub in India perceive challenges of communicating and collaborating virtually within multinational and multicultural R&D teams?

- How did they cope with these challenges, and how did they try to find common ground, both at an individual and an organizational level?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The Danish multinational company, one of the world leaders in the wind power industry, is introduced, followed by a brief presentation of the qualitative case study that was conducted at its R&D hub in India, with the purpose of articulating the work experiences of Indian managers and employees with regard to intercultural communication and collaboration in a primarily virtual setting. The empirical analysis addresses the questions raised above. The concluding section highlights the specific conditions that in this case make virtual team collaboration a success and offers suggestions for organizational initiatives to further facilitate intercultural learning processes within virtual multinational teams.

### **The case company and the socio-cultural context of its Indian R&D hub**

The Danish MNC develops, manufactures, sells and maintains land-based and offshore wind turbines that use wind energy to generate electricity. It has R&D, production and sales facilities all over the world, with activities spanning all five continents. The Danish MNC, which in 2012 employed more than 20,000 employees, is still the world's largest wind turbine supplier, but its role as market leader is seriously challenged by other Western companies. In recent years Chinese and Indian companies have also become competitors (Møller Larsen & Pedersen, 2010).

Two business units have for many years operated across the multinational organization and its various business units: the human resources department, which is called 'People and Culture', and the Technology R&D department. The latter is key to maintaining a leading position in

sustainable energy technology through the development of new wind power systems and the improvement of existing products. There are research and development facilities in Denmark, the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, Singapore, China and India. The Danish MNC has been present in India since 1997 with manufacturing facilities; its R&D site was established in 2007. During field studies in India in autumn 2009, approximately 140 R&D engineers and other specialists were working in Chennai in ten teams, which also had members at the other R&D sites, primarily in Denmark, Germany and Singapore. In 2011, the number of employees in Chennai increased to about 300, making this R&D hub the MNC's largest Technology R&D facility outside Denmark. This development from a back-office to a centre of excellence and an R&D hub mirrors how the MNC perceives the strategic importance of situating and consolidating research and development activities in India, which is one of the fastest growing markets for wind energy.

Chennai, formerly called Madras, is India's second largest exporter of software, information technology and information-technology-enabled services. A high concentration of high-tech companies, such as Satyam Computer Services and Tata Consultancy Services (India), and Accenture, General Electric and Pay Pal (United States), are situated along the so-called 'IT corridor', where the city is able to offer an efficient and relatively stable IT infrastructure. Several Danish MNCs are also located in this area, close to prominent educational institutions, which develop an immense talent pool across various scientific disciplines. Even though the Danish MNC's Indian R&D hub does not recruit its employees immediately after they graduate, it is still very important for the company to be situated in an industrial cluster of IT companies and to enter public-private partnerships around research issues with relevant institutions, such as the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, which is ranked among India's top three engineering

institutions and considered one of the foremost institutes of national importance in higher technological education, as well as basic and applied research.

The managing director and the chief financial officer are Danish whereas nearly all other managers and employees in the Technology R&D site in Chennai are of Indian nationality. The managing director is a truly 'global cosmopolitan' (Brimm, 2010). He is widely travelled all over the world, and he has worked on a more permanent basis in India since 1997 and has also been engaged in transfer of technologies and involved in training and managing Indian employees before he was employed by the Danish MNC. Since 2007 he is the managing director for the R & D site in Chennai and at the same time vice president of the transnational Technology R & D business unit. He thus plays an important role as boundary spanner (Nagi & Kleinberg, 2011) between the Indian site and the Danish headquarters.

Many of the Indian employees have come from other Indian states to Chennai, attracted by the excellent job opportunities in this industrial IT cluster. They display a variety of cultural profiles, which are not necessarily reflective of any homogeneous Indian national culture. India is a very complex society with many languages, cultures and religions, so it does not make any sense to claim that all inhabitants in this large nation share cultural attributes (Gopinath, 1998) such as it is often assumed in more essentialist approaches to cross-cultural management (House et al., 2004). Moreover, in urban contexts and among employees working in Western MNCs 'traditional' Indian values and behavioural patterns are drastically changing in the interaction with values and behaviours introduced by the companies and the global media, and more hybrid cultures emerge (Hannerz, 2000). What the Indian employees in the R&D hub in Chennai have in common is therefore just as much a strong professional identity as engineers and technicians and a certain pride and an identification with the MNC as one of the market leaders within sustainable energy products.



## **Design of the case study**

Before going to India the researchers of this case study visited the Danish headquarters and interviewed several managers and employees in the HR department named 'People and Culture' to get an idea of how the company prepared their managers and employees for cultural encounters, either face-to-face or in virtual collaboration. Among those interviewed was also the manager of the MNC's 'Global Mobility Center', who were responsible for offering language and culture training to international assignees, primarily those expatriated from headquarters to foreign subsidiaries on long-term assignments.

During the visit to the R&D hub, we stayed at the workplace from early morning until most of the employees left the offices nine hours later. Most employees live in the city centre of Chennai and are transited to the IT corridor south of the city by staff busses in the morning, a drive of approximately one-and-a-half to two hours. Work begins at 9 a.m., and the busses head back to Chennai city at 6:15 p.m.

Between interviews, we made observations of the workplace, spoke informally with employees in the cafeteria at lunch time, collected company documents and photographed the offices. The Indian HR and communication managers and two Indian managers of the R&D teams were interviewed individually. Ten senior and junior engineers were also interviewed about their backgrounds, their motivation for working in the company and their experiences with cross-cultural communication and collaboration. In these interviews, we made use of pictograms and asked the engineers to describe their work day, their tasks and their interaction with team members in India and other R&D sites and simultaneously make drawings of it. To gain another perspective on the specific work tasks and the interaction practices we also 'shadowed'

(Czarniawska, 2007) some engineers during an entire work day. Moreover, we observed a two-hour weekly video conference with Indian and Danish members of an R&D team, during which they discussed the status of current projects.

Finally, we conducted two focus group interviews with – in total - eight Indian senior engineers. First we asked them to make a kind of diagnosis: Which aspects of communication and collaboration in the virtual team do you think are well-functioning? Where do you experience difficulties and challenges? We then asked them to propose some solutions: Where could you individually contribute to improved communication and collaboration across borders? Where could the organization/ the managerial team contribute to improved communication and collaboration across borders? Lastly, we asked them to prioritize: What do you think should be done on a short-term basis? What is needed over the long term?

### **Enablers of communication and team collaboration across borders**

Among the well-functioning aspects of communication and collaboration across borders, many Indian employees mention that the advanced information and communication technology facilities in Chennai and at other R&D sites significantly enhance team collaboration across borders. Skype and web-cams are used for phone calls that involve only two employees, who share computer screens in order to look at drawings and models and exchange ideas for specific problem-solving. For larger meetings within a virtual team there are various video conference facilities. The most advanced is the telepresence room, where each participant can ‘dial in’ and see -- and speak with -- every other member of the team on a screen as if they were sitting around a table in the same room.

The Indian employees also draw attention to the cross-cultural training that takes place both in India and in Denmark on a regularly basis, to ensure that all new employees in the R&D teams are introduced to cultural issues. The MNC's Global Mobility Center primarily offered tools that employees in the global organization may use for self-assessment before an international assignment and to further development of their cultural awareness on an individual basis. But the managing director of the Indian R & D hub has taken an initiative that goes far beyond it: All Danish R & D team members are offered one-day courses conducted by an Indian culture consultant who has lived and worked in Denmark since 1972. Similar one-day courses in 'Cultural Sensitivity for Business Effectiveness. Working with Colleagues from Denmark' are offered to the Indian team members by an Indian culture consultant (Lauge, 2009).

The culture course offered to the Indian R&D teams introduces them to comparisons of national values based on Hofstede's (1980) concepts of power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity. Moreover, it gives an historical account of Denmark as a welfare society and introduces to what in the course is termed as 'the Danish management style' and 'the Danish communication style', and to the ways Danes prefer to organize teamwork and meetings (Lauge 2009). This cross-cultural training thus tends to present claims about primordial or essential cultural differences between Danes and Indians when it comes to behaviour, values, norms, cultural traditions and their impact on life in the workplace based on a framework of bipolar cultural dimensions. It also contributes to the mainstream understanding of intercultural communication and team collaboration characterized by a focus on potential cultural frictions and culture clashes between members of nations that are perceived as fixed cultural entities (Søderberg & Holden, 2002). Adaptation to the most powerful group, that is the Danish team members close to the headquarters, is the implicit recommendation, rather than finding a common ground and a third

way to collaborate based on negotiation and integration of good practices ( Brannen & Salk, 2000) from the working cultures in the various R&D sites.

Nevertheless, according to the Indian interviewees, members of virtual teams in both Denmark and India greatly appreciate that the management of Technology R&D initiated these culture courses, seemingly without any assistance from the MNC's People and Culture department. The Indian interviewees find that this culture course has not only increased their awareness of national cultural differences, but also made it easier for them to adjust in order to meet Danish/Western norms. Besides the obvious differences in how team members at various sites behave in relation to their superiors, several interviewees mention the differences in body language that often create misunderstanding in communication with Westerners: When an Indian tilts his/her head to one side and then to the other, he/she intends to convey the message that he/she is listening carefully. However, most Westerners would spontaneously interpret a headshake as "no", making it extremely important for Indian employees to adjust their body language to avoid confusing their colleagues during video conferences and Skype meetings with web-cams.

The Indian engineers are not only introduced to Denmark through a culture course. Many of them travel to Denmark on a regular basis, and they often stay for two or three weeks, collaborating closely with Danish team members and visiting factories that manufacture the products they have designed and developed. These visits facilitate both knowledge-sharing and development of stronger social relationships within the R&D teams.

During the culture seminars, Indian engineers have explicitly been told by the Indian consultant that they should not ask their Danish colleagues too much about their family life, because most Danes prefer to maintain a strict divide between their professional and private lives. However,

the Indians appreciate receiving photos of their Danish team members and small pieces of information about them: Are they single or married, do they have children, and what are their interests and hobbies? These personal details make it easier for the Indian team members to trust their long-distance colleagues and collaborate with them. Several Indian interviewees also mention that they greatly appreciate receiving dinner invitations from Danish colleagues during stays at headquarters. They know from their culture course that Danes would seldom invite even their Danish colleagues to visit their private homes and meet their families, so this is interpreted as a gesture of great hospitality.

Another strong enabler of virtual team cohesion and collaboration is the shared professional identity as engineers. There might be smaller differences in the team members' educational backgrounds, but differences in areas of expertise can also be turned into an asset. As long as a team discusses technical issues they draw on a shared terminology and methodological approach, and they are all dedicated to reaching specific goals through a collaborative effort. Moreover, the Indian engineers are self-confident and do not feel inferior to the Danish engineers: Some have studied abroad at university, but most of them graduated from Indian universities and Indian institutes of science with a high reputation.

The majority of the Indian managers and employees were previously employed by other multinational companies operating in India. They are very satisfied to be working in a Western company and explain that there is less focus on hierarchy at this workplace than in most Indian companies, and less direct instruction, follow-up and control. They also find that they have better professional learning opportunities and more room for personal development than in most Indian companies, where tasks are often more narrowly defined. Some Indian employees add that they were also attracted by an industry producing sustainable energy. They did not necessarily know about the Danish MNC before they applied for their jobs, but they like the

idea that this company is developing and producing products that might offer people and societies a better environment. They expect a bright future for the sustainable energy industry in India, and working with wind power fits well with the Indian society's increasing environmental concerns, and with their own individual aspirations to contribute to a more green environment. Therefore, they also identify strongly with the company, its corporate values and long-term goals. The organizational identity they share with team members from other R&D sites is another enabler of collaboration across borders.

Whereas most of the Indian employees have worked in other MNCs, some have even been expatriated to subsidiaries in Germany, France and the United Kingdom for a longer period of time. Hence, most of the Indian engineers are, at least to a certain extent, familiar with Western communication and management styles and teamwork practices. Some of them are not only ready, but also able to act as bridge builders and boundary spanners (Fitzsimmons, Miska & Stahl, 2011; Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). A younger Indian engineer who studied engineering at a university in the United Kingdom and worked at an MNC based in the United States said he tries to function as a mediator within his virtual team. He comments on the smaller differences in communication style that he has experienced: "Right from their school days and college days, Indian people hesitate to ask questions. Even if they have a valid doubt or some sort of question they would like to ask. [...] And they carry the same attitude to the workplace. [...] This is something I found is quite different in the European culture, where kids are encouraged to ask questions, which I think is a good thing. Right now Indian people have so many doubts in their mind and yet most of them don't open their mouth. [...] Five years or six years back I didn't have the same thought processes. I used to hesitate to talk a lot – or rather to ask questions. It's not the same now. Whenever there is a situation where people hesitate to ask questions I ask them: 'Why do you hesitate?' [...] 'Why do you fear what some other might think about it? [...]"

Just ask the question! What's wrong about it? You're not hurting anybody in the process!' And if somebody in the team hesitates to ask the question, I would just think: 'Why not me?' I mean anyway an answer is required."

### **Perceived challenges in virtual communication and collaboration**

Cultural diversity may be both a liability and an asset in team collaboration. In our research, we tried to gain an impression of how Indian managers and employees perceive the challenges of communicating and collaborating in multinational and multicultural R&D teams, and how they experience cultural diversity internally at the Indian workplace and in the Indian team members' virtual communication and collaboration with R&D colleagues at other locations.

As mentioned earlier, the Indian employees come from various Indian provinces and thus in themselves form a multilingual and multicultural group. Cultural diversity is an issue both internally at the Indian workplace and in the virtual communication and collaboration with teams at other R&D sites. The Indian employees speak different mother tongues and use English as a lingua franca when they communicate and collaborate, both in their interaction with colleagues at the workplace in Chennai and with team members at other locations.

According to the Indian interviewees some communication processes are not yet systematically developed to fit the Danish MNC's self-perception as a global company. They mention that some departments at headquarters still disseminate policy documents in Danish and send emails in Danish to the Indian R&D hub. Some Danish R&D managers and employees even send emails in which the conversation was started among Danes and thus written in Danish – only the last sections of a long chain of emails are specifically addressed to their Indian colleagues and written in English. This makes the Indian team members feel excluded and under-informed.

Therefore they request a more strict company language policy: all company documents and work-related emails should be written in English and thus in principle be accessible to everyone.

Some Indian interviewees also complain about low English-language proficiency among Danish blue-collar workers. Sometimes, when tools that have been designed and developed in India are manufactured in Denmark, the Indian team members are required to collaborate with workers at the Danish factory, and the company does not always send a professional translator who can facilitate the dialogue. Some white-collar workers at headquarters, such as secretaries and people employed in group staff functions, also fall short of meeting the Indian engineers' expectations with regard to linguistic proficiency in English.

Many Indian interviewees experience that this Danish MNC cares more for its employees than many other Western MNCs operating in India. This observation may reflect the Indian team members' preference for a management style which was coined by Sinha (1980) as nurturant task leadership. They also mention that the Danish managing director in Chennai, who has worked many years in India, to a certain extent practices this kind of leadership. For example, even though working overtime may be appreciated in other Indian business contexts as a sign of commitment and loyalty, the managing director is very concerned with ensuring that his Indian employees maintain a certain work-life balance: "He hates if we stay late." Also, the Indian general manager of the teams is perceived as a 'father' who looks after the well-being of his 'family'. He is committed to developing the talents of his Indian staff and to supporting them on a daily basis, and he discourages his employees from working in the evening or at night, unless they have to meet a specific deadline.

However, some Indian interviewees complain that Danish managers of the R&D teams at headquarters in general offer them less attention, feedback and support than they expect to



receive. It may mirror an expectation of more close follow up related to the prevailing 'nurturant task leadership' model (Sinha, 1980). An Indian manager also noticed that some Danish managers tend to be very straightforward and sometimes even rude in their comments and feedback. He constructed this image of them: "Danes are like jackfruits, they are big and have a thorny surface, but the inner fruit is soft and sweet." As indicated in this statement, the Indian manager has no doubt that the Danes are kind people, but it seems that they forget to voice their appreciation, even when the Indian employees have done an especially good job. He warns that Danish managers who do not learn to better protect the Indian team members' face in situations where their performance is criticized risk creating severe problems, as most Indians pay much more respect to authorities and people in powerful positions than Danes ever would. The Indian employees may in such situations feel insulted and treated as inferior, but they would hesitate to offer any direct feedback in this regard to their superiors. The Danish managers will thus remain unaware of the negative consequences of a communication style that is developed in a Western low-context culture (Hall, 1976) where criticizing one's work does not imply criticizing the person since personal and work-related issues are strictly separated (Van Marrewijk, 2010). When Danish managers practice a communication style that seems to be characterized by a lack of explicit appreciation and conscious, face-protecting behaviour in relation to Indian employees who are socialized into a high-context culture (Hall, 1976) that tends to prefer a more implicit communication, they inadvertently risk disappointing these employees, who in the end will become less motivated and committed to their work.

The Indian employees who reflected upon the perceived differences from their preferred communication style explain that Indians tend to praise all the time, even when the goal is simply to make people work even harder and be more efficient. They propose that it might have to do with different management traditions that have created expectations among many Indian

employees of more close follow-up and feedback (Sinha, 1980); an expectation the Danish managers do not acknowledge because Danish team members are trained to work more independently of control and approval.

The Indians also observed that they always answer emails immediately after receiving them no matter who the sender is, whereas Danes prioritize their mails and often wait some days before answering. The Indians instinctively feel insulted by this lack of attention, but they are also aware that the Danes, like themselves, might be very busy and perhaps even overwhelmed by work. However, because of the power asymmetry between the Danish R&D managers and the Indian team members, who, not least in the initial phase of collaboration were treated as sub-contractors in a distant back-office, the Indians have indeed been very dependent on Danes giving them feedback, reviews and approvals.

Communication with regard to vacation time can also pose problems. Danish employees have six vacation weeks a year and a large number of public holidays as well, whereas Indian employees have longer work days and only around two weeks' vacation per year. Indian team members can become very frustrated if they are not informed well in advance about their European counterparts' holidays and vacations, especially if a project is delayed because they are waiting for a review or approval and receive an 'out of office' message saying that a project manager is not accessible due to a three-week summer holiday.

The geographical distance between Chennai and headquarters is huge, but as already mentioned the time difference is only three-and-a-half hours in summer and four-and-a-half hours in winter. Nevertheless, Indian managers and employees must normally wait until noon to contact their Danish counterparts, and sometimes they must stay at the workplace longer if they urgently need to communicate in real time with their colleagues in Denmark. Conversely, the

Indian interviewees never experience that Danish managers or team members start their work earlier to adapt to a normal Indian workday, and this experience adds to the perceived power relations between Danes and Indians.

When comparing their working conditions in India with those of their Danish colleagues, some Indian interviewees also raise their voice and call for better work-life-balance and longer vacations. They point out that Danes have six weeks of vacation and that many have flexible working hours, leaving the workplace early in the afternoon to spend time with their children and then working again online late in the evening. They find that ideally there should be a company standard of work hours and work days, no matter which country you are employed in, and that flexible work time should be offered outside Denmark as well. A hard-working Indian senior engineer observes: "I'm a bachelor and for me work is first, life is next. I also work in the staff bus on the way to and from the R&D office and often until I go to bed. But if I get married, my wife will soon kick me out if I continue to work like that."

With regard to the observed power balance between headquarters and the Indian R&D hub, the Indian employees acknowledge that the MNC cares for them, but add that they also want to climb further up the ladder of responsibility and assume ownership of projects: "Caring for the employees is also a matter of challenging us, offering us more difficult tasks and trusting that we are able to cope with them. Some Danes do not seem to want our assistance and our comments on their projects, even though we might be able to help them. We also have a certain expertise that they may benefit from." This statement expresses a wish for mutual knowledge sharing and development, rather than a one sided knowledge transfer and control. Moreover, it may indicate that some Danish project managers are reluctant to leave more challenging tasks to the Indian engineers and thereby run the risk that the Indians show that they are capable to deal with them, thus making some of the Danish team members redundant. This was at stake in

another case with cross-border collaboration where German and Indian engineers struggled about project control, and the distribution of high-end IT jobs (Van Marrewijk, 2010).

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper focused on how Indian managers and employees in an Indian R&D hub perceived communication and collaboration across borders and how they coped with challenges related to the virtual workplace. It gave salience to the voices of a group of people who are seldom heard, and it addressed some contextually bound, experiential aspects of relevance for both cross-cultural management and international human resource management in MNCs.

The majority of studies of virtual multinational teams tends to highlight cultural and communicative difficulties and challenges and to give examples of what is conceived as clashes between communication and negotiation styles. In this qualitative case study of a Danish MNC's global R&D hub, it seemed as if those involved in virtual teamwork experienced only minor difficulties related to time zone differences, different communication styles and power relations between headquarters and the Indian R&D site. Moreover, there seemed to be a willingness among the Indian managers and employees to find still new ways to handle the perceived difficulties, both at an individual and an organizational level.

Inspired by Stahl, Mäkelä, Zander and Maznevski (2010), who used a lens of positive organizational scholarship, we have tried to find positive aspects of cross-cultural dynamics and to identify some of the specific conditions that in this case seem to make the virtual team collaboration effective, the Indian team members motivated, and the outcome of global collaboration innovative.

Based on the accounts from Indian managers and employees, there are several enablers of virtual team collaboration: For example, advanced information and communication technology

facilitated virtual communication whenever needed and high English-language proficiency among the engineers at different R & D sites made dialogue and knowledge exchange feasible. Moreover, team members who graduated from universities and other educational institutions with a high reputation within their field of science shared a strong professional identity as engineers and technicians. They could draw on a shared technological discourse and knowledge base as well as shared approaches to task-related problem-solving.

Whereas cross-cultural management research often assumes that collaboration takes place between people embedded in distinct national cultures and thus as bearers of a specific national culture (House. et al, 2004), it is notable that the majority of Indian managers and employees had previous experience working in other Western MNCs rather than in Indian-owned companies. Hence, they were familiar with Western communication and management styles and experienced in the interplay between the cultures specific to the MNC and its host countries (Caprar, 2011). And those Indians who had not already had such experiences themselves were offered culture courses that introduced them to a North European communication and management style and made them more aware of relevant cultural differences. Moreover, some of the Indian managers and employees were able to act as boundary-spanners and bridge-builders due to their study and work experiences in other cultural environments.

This case study also demonstrated that it makes sense to understand organizations as sites for a multiplicity of cultures. Not only social constructions of national cultures, but also of organizational and professional cultures are at play in this specific case, and the latter pave the way for virtual collaboration across borders. Many of the Indian employees identified strongly with the Danish MNC and were proud to work for this world leader in the wind power industry. They also shared a professional identity with engineers at other R&D sites with a similar commitment to developing sustainable energy solutions.

Surprisingly, the MNC's HR department did not offer any significant support to the global virtual teams. Their sparse initiatives addressed the long-term expatriates. Hence management of the Technology R&D business unit took initiatives to offer culture courses to all members of the global virtual R & D teams. Even though these culture courses had elements that probably most of all contributed to sophisticated stereotyping of the Other (Osland & Bird, 2000), it seems as if they nevertheless made team collaboration more effective in so far as Indian team members made serious efforts to adapt to Western/Danish norms. The focus of this case study was limited to the experience of the Indian team members who participated in cultural training. In order to get an impression of what team leaders and ordinary team members from other R & D sites learnt and how they made use of various elements in the culture course they were offered, it would have been beneficial to conduct interviews at other R & D sites. It would have and highlighted the social interactions and the social construction of similarities and differences between the team members and thus added more complexity to this specific case study.

A practical implication of the findings in this specific case study would be to support the virtual teamwork and improve the team members' cultural awareness and sensitivity by offering follow-up seminars that focus on the particular difficulties experienced by team members in their daily intercultural collaboration, for example in relation to time, communication and power relations as touched upon in the analysis above.

Instead of relying on an external culture consultant's suggestions that potentially contribute to more sophisticated stereotyping based on an essentialist bipolar model of national cultures, such a follow-up course could function as a venue for reflexivity if monitored by a person that was ready to act as a facilitator and coach of the team members' intercultural learning processes (Gertsen, Søderberg & Zølner, 2012). Establishing a forum in which members of global virtual teams could share their daily experiences of cross-cultural co-operation and their problem-

stories, exchange knowledge and discuss practical solutions to critical issues could help to bridge perceived cultural differences and find common ground within the geographically dispersed teams. Moreover, such a forum could also be a venue to discuss various local perspectives on corporate strategy, values and procedures of relevance for the R & D teams and would thus also provide the MNC valuable feedback and further its development into a truly global organization.

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