Developing cross-cultural managerial skills through social media

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to familiarize managers with alternative social media applications of cross-cultural training approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper provides an overview of the current state of social media-based cross-cultural training and its trajectory.

Findings – Social media is increasingly an integral part of contemporary communication. This paper shows how training technologies engaging to the born-digital generation have multiple advantages and unique deployment opportunities for cross-cultural know-how development.

Originality/value – This paper provides a technological reframing of intercultural training that better aligns with the practices of the millennial generation, who are ready to embrace the accoutrements of international business and global networks. Readers will be sensitized to the advantages and disadvantages of new social media for intercultural training and education.

Keywords Crowdsourcing, Social media, Cross-cultural communication, Cross-cultural training, Cultural competency, Digital identity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Employees and others are quite aware of marketing applications of social media but are largely incognizant about management applications, including training and development ones. Social media are inherently international. This situation can be leveraged creatively to provide sandboxes for experimentation by managers in an organization, with a mind to having employees better understand what it is like to interact with people in or from other cultures. Among the areas where social media might be used to support and bolster cross-cultural interpersonal competence are the endeavors where it matters most; specifically in organizational communication, collaboration, recruitment, projects, relationship maintenance, transactions, and sharing. Through social networking, the people of an organization are often connected with many peers in far-flung places (Verbyla *et al.*, 2014).

Management qua management increasingly involves the knowledge and use of new technologies. In a program designed to develop cross-cultural skills of managers, enhancing and developing knowledge of social media technologies is valuable. Social media with its often-attenuated syntax engenders misunderstandings in single-culture contexts. It might amplify the communication issues associated with intercultural communication and therefore should be used as a training channel with a mind to alerting trainees to be mindful of that (Panetta, 2015).

One advantage of using social media for cross-cultural skills training is that it can be more engaging than traditional training media and approaches. An ability to rapidly alter social media training messages and materials also can make it preferable to less dynamic forms such as books (Xu and Mocarski, 2014). Social media in intercultural

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training and education also has the potential to enable new trainee-centered approaches involving bottom-up support for learning that harnesses collective intelligence rather than hierarchical, trainer-centered approaches.

A problem with applying social networking practices to intercultural communications training is that many trainers do not have the skills and related confidences in that technology. Many trainers are not digital natives, but rather come from traditional learning environments, and are even reluctant to move into social media-based teaching (Makkonen *et al.*, 2014).

To the extent that having employees up to speed in international and global networking might be an organizational priority, using social media support for intercultural training might make it more sensible to utilize for intercultural training. Also, social media-based training might prove more cost effective than traditional approaches.

Effective cross-cultural training

Cross-cultural training might involve co-creation: a trainee explains the sort of jobs, transactions, and international venues they will be operating in. Then, the trainer and trainee, or group of trainees, can work to share knowledge and critical insights as the training proceeds. Trainers should develop cross-cultural information literacy in trainees so that they transcend the limitations of monocultural information reception. Some social media such as Facebook have automatic translation incorporated into them to readily foster wider than just English contributions and comments. An advantage of incorporating automatic translation utilities into intercultural training is that they often provide literal translations, which communicate more of the culture than moving from idiom to idiom. Trainees should ideally become more adept at locating, uploading, sharing, and synthesizing knowledge and know-how across cultures and over a spectrum of learning media platforms (Mullen and Wedwick, 2008). Trainers should be on the alert for the sharing of peculiar experiences that may not be associated with cross-cultural communication *per se* but rather idiosyncratic situations involving a particular individual and misunderstandings based on ambiguities other than interculturally generated ones. Social media-based, intercultural communications training ideally involves employees critically engaging relevant, actual job content rather than being presented with artificial content without any clear real connection to the work at hand (Tess, 2013, p. A64). This can set the stage for employees to be mentored in actual critical assessment of the information (Barnes *et al.*, 2007).

One issue in using social media for intercultural communication training is that different national cultures have different prevailing attitudes toward knowledge sharing and other knowledge management processes (Jiacheng *et al.*, 2010). Such cultural barriers need to be addressed to avoid failure due to a lack of social media adoption by individuals within organizations (Ray, 2013). Among the array of social media options that cross-cultural competency trainers might utilize are Twitter, Google+, YouTube, FaceTime, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Hangouts, Pinterest, Skype, and Instagram. One group of people who can be leveraged as mentors in developing cross-cultural competence is the network of fellow alumni from the universities from which an employee has received degrees. Employees need to develop cultural proficiency, which entails knowing when to listen, when to speak, and when to ask for help in each of the cultures they will be engaging (Hilton, 2007).

Employees should be supported in learning how to locate and follow the social media pages of cross-cultural communication experts. If an employee is interested in

developing intercultural competency for a particular nation, that employee should be assisted in identifying and following the pages of key business experts, leaders, and professors in that nation. The employee can then watch – and hopefully join – discussions on topics of interest to the denizens of that culture, which might make the employee more competent and knowledgeable in conversations when he or she arrives in the host country. The deeper the employee's understanding of the issues that concern people there, the more he or she will be able to sidestep, rather than muddle into, contentious topics. The cross-cultural mentoring should transcend such facile stereotypes as "Germans are too focused on order" or "Southern Europeans are too unstructured," but rather look to common values that might be the basis for productive exchange (Cambié and Ooi, 2009, p. 80). Also, some topics that might be important should be discussed with a mind to emphasizing the responsibility of particular individuals or companies rather than deride a particular nation or culture because of an instance of malfeasance. For example, blaming German culture for the surreptitious software built into Volkswagen diesel engines could be taken as an offensive and inappropriate bias.

As an aid to this process, mobile devices enable employees to communicate with trainers, managers, and colleagues across all departments and organizations to access content and support even when they are in distant cultures. That is, when employees are in situ in a different culture, they can discreetly ask for clarifications or advice as they encounter new situations, allowing them to be more informed before responding (Cavus *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, the ability of employees to share what they are finding in specific intercultural field contexts and environments – such as offices, stores, factories, and other venues – with remotely located support personnel, colleagues, and managers synchronously can enable the on-site employees to integrate others into these situations interactively. An on-site employee unable to effectively communicate with a customer could share video comments sent by a colleague more proficient in the local language. With the added boon and prevalence of these mobile devices, cross-cultural training and interaction becomes a much less daunting task.

Crowdsourcing cross-cultural training

One type of cross-cultural training structure is crowdsourcing. By applying a crowdsourcing model to cross-cultural training, information on the intercultural competencies required for a position might be developed by, say, a group of 400 employees in 15 different countries. These employees might collaboratively create the manual and ancillary resources – such as videos and exercises – based on their actual experiences working for the organization. Such a structure could be additionally useful since employees often complain that training content is disconnected from real-world experiences. This kind of intercultural collaborative environment creating a collective intelligence is its own learning perforce. Crowdsourcing can expand the audience from one trainer to a small group of employees to all employees in a company, on occasion. Employees can post how people in their cultures typically act on particular types of problems to internal corporate websites, such as blogs, or create podcasts, or engage in corporate Tweetchats. They can also curate content on Pinterest about specific cross-cultural skills issues and topics, such as the approach to environmental sustainability in the culture they are immersed in. Developing reports for the world rather than for one trainer makes them more compelling (Robbins and Singer, 2014, p. 388). Participating employees can post videos or text discussing problems of intercultural communication that they have stumbled upon and what their responses and outcomes were. Also, resources for developing specific intercultural competencies

and contacts to support them in far-flung places should be provided. Team-based management styles are supported by aligning them with the digital communication skills and interests of many employees (Rasiah, 2014, p. 369). Such a structure can be the context for employees from different cultures to work together on managerial tasks. Aiming to use such wide-ranging cases and discussions will hopefully develop an organization where having a global mindset is the norm (Robbins and Singer, 2014, p. 388). Rather than having trainees passively digest content, assigning them the production of videos can enhance their communication skills, spark creativity, and cause them to more carefully mull over cross-cultural ideas prior to stating them in the videos (Smith, 2014).

How active individuals are in joining social media programs of organizations is to a large extent determined by the personal attitudes of individuals. An employee seeking to support his or her organization is likely to express opinions and be active in social media supporting the organization's doings. Attitudes and emotions are important in determining how active organizational members are in cross-national social media mobilization. The implication is that fostering engagement and positive attitudes toward the firm and its endeavors will ultimately be a smart way to spark cross-national social media activism on behalf of issues supported by the company (Chen *et al.*, 2015).

The digital identity: cross-cultural perceptions

In the current business epoch, individuals typically have digital identities. It can be expected that others with whom you might be working within a company or another organization will look online to find out more about an individual. Of course, this digital profiling can happen internationally too. The author of this paper mentioned to the then CEO of Zappos in an interview at the company's headquarters in Nevada that he had noticed a Tweet mentioning that the executive had visited a shoe store in a bunny suit. The executive became defensive and explained it was for a charity event, etc., but it was clear that this was not a piece of information that supported the digital identity he hoped to convey.

Many organizations value organizational cultures of transparency among managers and other employees (Mishra *et al.*, 2014). Developing understandings of the boundaries in various national cultures of honesty and directness is an important issue. So, what could be taken as timely, accurate, and relevant information might be taken as brash and impertinent in another culture. All of these factors feed into the identities that people create for themselves across both the physical and digital mediums.

Social media sites, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Glassdoor can be used to recruit talent with the right cross-cultural competencies. Indeed, nearly all companies in the USA are currently using social media for recruitment, and this methodology is not unique to the USA either. A large Vietnamese bank, Navibank, used Skype and Facebook along with other electronic communication mediums to create an international work team with ten new branches of the bank in Cambodia during 2015 (Etim and Hunyh, 2015). Employers and recruiters use sites such as Facebook to gain insights into the extent of intercultural orientation as exhibited in a potential employee's attitudes, thoughts, values, lifestyle choices, and personal choices (Sarika, 2015).

Certainly, pictures and comments about a person from his or her youth or from casual non-business contexts can be elements construed by viewers into a digital identity that might seem unhelpful, misleading, and incorrect to an individual, which

leads many to the predicament succinctly encapsulated by the question "Who can you trust?" (Cambié and Ooi, 2009, p. 129). For instance, one of the author's students was a treasurer of a religious organization, and had to be admonished that having pictures of himself binge drinking via a hose from a keg and subsequent unconsciousness might best be removed or set to more limited access. Tolerance for drinking and associated frivolous endeavors sometimes is filtered through the same aforementioned cultural lenses. Someone from a very conservative culture in which people do not typically use alcohol might be frightened and horrified, whereas people from cultures such as those of Eastern Europe and some Asian countries, such as Japan, might view off-hours drinking as a positive bonding activity. In Poland, business partners who do not heavily drink at dinner and other such social situations might be less trusted and might miss out on camaraderie and bonding among those who are drinking. In many countries, including Russia, drinks are often toasts to a person's health, and not participating can be construed as an insult.

The point is that digital artifacts of events that are considered normal and unsurprising in some cultures might seem crazy and unthinkable in others. What social media are understood to be and how they are comfortably used is itself defined by each culture (Cambié and Ooi, 2009, p. 100). Trainees should be instructed in how to locate information on themselves on the internet and how to delete it, block it, or request those controlling the site to do so when deemed appropriate. Positive images, such as working on a social service project such as for Habitat for Humanity, might be prominently displayed on Facebook and Twitter sites. That is, one might follow the advice of Andy Warhol: "When you've got it, flaunt it."

Social networking across cultures

Today's employees come to us as increasingly proficient social networkers. It is imperative that managers utilize this foundation to make them into savvy professional networkers rather than merely recreational ones (Rasiah, 2014, p. 370). One must also assume that a number of employees have not yet been engaged by social media and need to be coaxed from the age of dinosaurs into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

LinkedIn specifically can be a platform through which employees can create networks of people in the same function as they are, such as customers, other academics and officials in countries of interest. The author connected with 60 social media experts when visiting Vienna to arrange a large meetup with many of them to enhance his visit. Employees should be mentored in effective LinkedIn use so that they can leverage the platform to expand their international networks, and that of their organization. That is, rather than arriving in a new city, in a new country, as a stranger in a strange land, social media such as LinkedIn and Twitter can enable one to arrive to a large number of nascent friends and colleagues.

Twitter is a relatively informal way for employees to establish short communications asynchronously with people in other cultures. As Tweets are limited to 140 characters, a user runs the risk of sounding terse or unfriendly. Risks of miscommunication run higher when Tweeting across cultural boundaries. With appropriate training and support, however, employees should be able to contact a trainer or cultural expert within their organization who can help them navigate unfamiliar situations.

A problem with informal social media is that for some platforms, such as Facebook, it is difficult to maintain appropriate boundaries among employees, and between

employees and other stakeholder organizations. This challenge is greater online than in traditional face-to-face venues, where the cultural norms of business are clearly distinct from intimate behaviors (Duncan-Daston *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, employees interacting via non-video social media lack the subtle but important cues of body language and facial expressions that can be used in face-to-face encounters to anticipate or correct inappropriate cultural behavior.

In using social media to reach out to individuals in foreign cultures, one early and important insight is how people in various cultures expect to be addressed generally, in social media, by people from other cultures and by people of various ranks. In some cultures, it might be rude or even insulting to seem overly familiar by using a first name, a diminutive name form (e.g. "Johnny"), or a nickname (e.g. "Bunny"). In some cultures, servants, children, and others of lesser status are addressed by first names; hence, the use of a first name in such a culture shows a certain intimacy, especially between people of different genders. Even a simple greeting could take on an unintended nuance. For example, Americans might begin an exchange on LinkedIn with "Hi John" as a basic greeting, not realizing that within John's culture, they are appearing to presume an intimate friendship or relation. An American might see the nickname "Flip" used in a Tweet at an individual and, in an attempt at friendliness, decide to use this moniker when addressing that individual, without realizing the original Twitter exchange was meant to tease the person and is the opposite of a favorite name. As employees represent their organization in professional exchanges, it is paramount that managers provide sufficient training and resources for awareness of the cultures in which their employees are interacting, even – and perhaps especially – if the interactions take place in the virtual world.

Some social media outlets tend to foster non-linear association webs of representation that might fit with relatively non-linear communication cultures more than ones where business dialogues are very linear (Dede, 2005). With Web 2.0 and even more so Web 3.0 – the Semantic Web – employees can more actively create and modify information to make its import and action implications clearer to people of different cultures (Wankel and Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2015; Greenhow *et al.*, 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). In the past, employees from various cultures were often limited to passive viewings of information. Web 3.0 social media fosters more interactive communication throughout the world (Wyk, 2014); social media can be used to give people from countries where the organizational form has been stolidly one way from managers to employees a more proactive and full exchange (Kim, 2008). However, managers should be wary of assuming social media's influence on cross-cultural performance will be thoroughly positive. For example, while social media enables people to connect with others around the world, it may actually promote more insular thinking and poorer decision making if it leads people to connect with people like themselves (Kane, 2015).

Creating cultural resources

Social media is changing education, including education in cross-cultural communication, phenomenally. Technology and social media are not only helping us to understand other existing cultures; they are actually fostering the creation of new cultures (Cambié and Ooi, 2009). Today's managers should embrace and take part in this movement by instituting creative programs in cross-cultural training.

An organization could establish a permanent team to direct and collect videos of interactions by staff working in far-flung places enhanced with interviews of key people involved in intercultural interfaces with a particular country both within and outside of the organization. Suppliers in Vietnam might be interviewed, perhaps over Skype, to discuss the kinds of cross-cultural snafus that might be sidestepped by people in the company. Employees might also create video blogs (vlogs) to provide an ongoing record of their experience in another country and culture. Other employees could view these videos produced by the organization and their peers, and could also search for videos using Bing, Google, or another search engine, where they might serendipitously stumble across another stimulating and valuable resource.

Such materials might foster better understandings of similarities and differences in how things are done in various cultures, with an aim at developing best practices for employees to follow in such contexts. A collaborative development platform for such projects might be a wiki. One other venue for sharing of cross-cultural interaction, successes, and problems might be a blog for company employees working across cultures. Such a forum could serve as an inventory of employees' cultural experiences, help new employees to adapt, and provide an enjoyable and engaging opportunity for questions and comments (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

Using social media as a vehicle for the training of cross-cultural skills is not only an effective prospect, but also a constantly evolving one. The multitude of venues presented by the format as well as the malleability of its applications is an important resource for managers. By utilizing knowledge of communication in foreign cultures and its expression in new media, managers are also better equipped than ever before to succeed in the globalized business environment. Organizations that are able to implement and adapt to these technologies in a considered manner will be heavily advantaged. Like the technologies that they are harnessing, modern employees must be able to adapt and operate across the globe.

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