Intercultural Training Requirements for Virtual Assignments: Results of an Explorative Empirical Study

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Abstract

Virtual assignments are characterized by the spatial separation of private and business life. The virtual delegate lives and interacts in one culture, yet he or she works together mainly with people from another culture. Since face-to-face contacts with colleagues, customers or suppliers are reduced to a minimum, firsthand experience of foreign cultures does not take place. As a result, intercultural training becomes essential.

The study suggests that virtual delegates are faced with several intercultural management problems such as different time zones and communication styles as well as language barriers. These problems are increased by the lack of face-to-face communication, and common trust-building mechanisms. Intercultural training may be an instrument for overcoming these challenges. However, they have to be adapted to the specific requirements of virtual expatriates. Moreover, intercultural training should not only be offered to the virtual delegates themselves, but also to the individuals with whom they interact in the host country.

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Problem and Objectives

One of the main challenges for multinational corporations (MNCs) is to find the right candidates for their overseas positions (Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994; Harvey, Speier & Novecevic, 2001; Harzing, 2001). Traditionally, MNCs have three alternatives, namely the recruitment of parent-country, host-country or third-country nationals (Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of traditional forms of staffing overseas positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parent-country nationals (PCNs)</th>
<th>Host-country nationals (HCNs)</th>
<th>Third-country nationals (TCNs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADVANTAGES</td>
<td>• compliance with company objectives, policies and politics</td>
<td>• lower wage level</td>
<td>• larger pool of qualified candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• facilitation of communication and coordination between headquarters and subsidiary</td>
<td>• greater motivation of local employees</td>
<td>• greater flexibility in recruitment (no need to considerate national interests)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• easier transfer of technical and management know-how</td>
<td>• increased continuity of management within the subsidiary</td>
<td>• simultaneous exchange of information</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• talented managers are given international experience</td>
<td>• positive perception of the subsidiary in the host-country</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• better understanding of headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• greater loyalty to headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• de-motivation of host-country nationals (limited career opportunities)</td>
<td>• coordination and control between headquarters and subsidiary is more difficult</td>
<td>• low familiarity with host-country conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• adaptation to host-country conditions is more difficult</td>
<td>• higher costs of communication</td>
<td>• increased expenses for coordination and delegation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• low continuity of management</td>
<td>• principle-agent-problem (encouragement of national rather than global goals)</td>
<td>• greater job requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• high labour costs</td>
<td></td>
<td>• development of cross-border corporate identity is more difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• problems for dual-career couples</td>
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Parent-country nationals (expatriates) are employed for many reasons, such as for the transfer of corporate culture and politics, the facilitation of communication between subsidiaries and
headquarters, the broadening of international experience of expatriates and the promotion of loyalty to the headquarters. Using host-country nationals, on the contrary, is often more economical. Moreover, their integration into the subsidiary is easier and they are more likely to be highly motivated. The recruitment of third-country nationals, as the third alternative, gives MNCs access to a larger pool of qualified managers and specialists. It also facilitates the coordination of their various foreign operations.

While these traditional forms of staffing have their particular advantages, there are many disadvantages as well, such as high coordination costs for the headquarters, dual career implications and reintegration problems (Delios & Bjorkman, 2000; Harzing, 2001; Tharenou & Harvey, 2006). As a result, new alternatives of staffing such as short-term delegations as well as international commuter and frequent flyer assignment are becoming more and more popular in many MNCs (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2000; Welch, Worm & Fenwick, 2004; Harris, Brewster & Erten, 2005). The most innovative form is the virtual assignment which will be the focus of this paper.

Several studies of traditional forms of staffing overseas positions reveal that their success depends to a large extent on a systematic intercultural training (Deshpande & Viswesvaran, 1992; Blake, Heslin & Curtis, 1996; Goldstein & Smith 1999). So far, however, no studies regarding the specific training requirements for virtual delegations can be found in the literature. It is therefore the objective of this study to analyse the requirements for such intercultural trainings, and to generate propositions for future research. In particular, the requirements for the training of virtual delegates will be analysed. The study has an explorative character. It is therefore not our aim to present robust answers but rather to describe and to analyze the usefulness of intercultural training for virtual assignments and to suggest possible directions for future research.
Intercultural Training Requirements for Virtual Assignments

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, the main characteristics of virtual assignments as a new form of filling overseas positions will be analysed. It is followed by a short paragraph on intercultural training. Afterwards, the research design and the methods of the study will be explained. This is followed by a description of remote services as a typical organizational context, in which virtual assignments take place. Based on an explorative study in the German software firm SAP several propositions on the training requirements for virtual assignments will be derived. The paper ends with a summary of the main results, contributions for managers as well as limitations and some suggestions for future research.

Virtual assignments as a new form of filling overseas positions

An international assignment is called virtual when “an employee does not relocate to a host location, but has international responsibilities for a part of the organization in another country which they manage from the home country” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2000, p. 31). According to this definition, virtual assignees remain most of the time in their home country. In comparison with expatriates, virtual assignees are not delegated abroad. They work in the headquarters and use modern electronic media such as emails, conference calls or videoconferences to communicate with their foreign colleagues, customers or suppliers. This interaction with individuals with other cultural backgrounds in other countries encompasses most of their work. As a result, virtual assignments reduce travel and relocation costs, avoid dual-career problems and enhance flexibility (Holtbrügge & Schillo, 2006). Like traditional forms of staffing overseas positions, there are different forms of virtual assignments. Long-term virtual expatriates interact with individuals from one foreign culture over a period of at least one year. During this time-span most of the working time is devoted to the virtual cooperation. Most long-term virtual expatriates do not only have technical but
also leadership tasks. The virtual assignment is an important period in his or her work life and a major criterion for future job promotion.

For short-term virtual expatriates, the duration of the assignment is reduced. The virtual delegation is only an episode in his or her career and has only limited impact on organizational structures and human resource management. This form is typically used for projects with exactly specified tasks and objectives.

Virtual commuters switch between virtual interactions with individuals in one foreign culture and face-to-face interactions with individuals at home. The virtual assignment includes less than 50 percent of the total working time.

Virtual frequent flyers switch between interactions with individuals in several foreign cultures. This form may include for example the simultaneous cooperation with partners in Asia, Europe and the U.S. Virtual frequent flyers have the highest requirements for intercultural flexibility and competence.

Regardless of their particular form, virtual assignments are characterized by the spatial separation of private and business life. The virtual delegate lives and interacts in one culture, yet he or she works together mainly with people from another culture. While the virtual assignee is physically located in the headquarters, from an organizational and operational point of view, he or she belongs to a foreign subsidiary.

Virtual assignments offer many advantages. One advantage is the ability to work abroad without going abroad. Virtual expatriates work internationally without leaving their familiar surrounding. The time of absence is reduced, which improves the work/life balance. Another advantage is that the family does not have to be relocated. This enables children to follow their education and spouses to maintain their own career, which avoids conflicts within the family and dual-career problems. Likewise, the reintegration of virtual expatriates is much
easier. Virtual assignees never lose contact to the headquarters and their local colleagues, because they remain integrated into its decision-making processes and networks. Moreover, virtual assignments are often cheaper than traditional forms of expatriation. For example, a salary premium as compensation for relocation abroad is not necessary. Finally, training for family members is superfluous since they remain in the home country.

However, virtual assignments are characterised by several problems as well. Since face-to-face contacts with colleagues, customers or suppliers are reduced to a minimum, no firsthand experiential learning of foreign cultures takes place. Because of the large geographic distance, the virtual assignee and his counterparts communicate mainly through emails, conference calls or videoconferences, while personal meetings and subsequently face-to-face communication are very limited. For example, it is not possible to meet colleagues and chat with them on the floor or during lunchtime. This enhances the likelihood of misunderstandings and intercultural management problems (Briscoe & Schuler, 2004, p. 222; Dowling & Welch, 2004, p. 68). Especially in Asian countries where it is indispensable to build up trust for good interpersonal and work relationships, this may cause serious difficulties (e.g., Dyer & Chu, 2000). Moreover, the richness of electronic media is limited, which makes this form of communication less appropriate for the transfer of implicit knowledge (Holtbrügge & Berg, 2004). In addition, communication through electronic media becomes more complex due to different communication styles and time zones (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). While this might be no problem for individuals from low-context cultures, individuals from high-context cultures are expected to feel less comfortable (Hall, 1966). Moreover, virtual assignees have to switch continuously between home- and host-country interactions which may have a negative impact on their work commitment and identification. As a result, the demands on virtual
assignees concerning communication and intercultural skills are very high (Holtbrügge & Schillo, 2008).

One instrument to overcome these problems of virtual assignments might be intercultural training. Given that efficient performance of virtual delegates is most likely to rely substantially on the competence with communication technology and with intercultural communication, the development and maintenance of these skills is crucial for their success. So far, however, no studies regarding the specific training requirements for virtual delegations can be found in the literature. It is therefore the objective of this study to analyse the requirements for such intercultural training, and to generate propositions for future research.

**Intercultural Training**

Since virtual assignments are a new phenomenon which has emerged in many MNCs in the last few years, their impact on the contents and methods of intercultural training have not yet been studied. Therefore, in the following a general approach of intercultural training is presented which will be used as a starting point for the subsequent adaptation to virtual assignments.

Brislin and Yoshida (1994, p. 183) define intercultural training as “formal efforts to prepare people for more effective interpersonal relations and for job success when they interact extensively with individuals from cultures other than their own”. In the literature, several concepts, methods and instruments of intercultural training can be found (e.g., Fowler & Mumford, 1995; Seelye, 1996; Cushner & Brislin, 1997; Landis, Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Most of them can be classified according to the typology of Gudykunst and Hammer (1983). This typology differentiates between two criteria: the process or method (didactic vs. experimental) by which training is delivered and the content (culture-general vs. culture-specific) of the training. Based on these two criteria four categories of intercultural training can be distin-
guished: didactic/culture-general, didactic/culture-specific, experiential/culture-general and experimental/culture-specific training (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**
Typology of intercultural training. *Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983*

Didactic and culture-general training contains general information about culture as well as information about its influence on management practices and interpersonal behaviour in particular. Mainly cognitive approaches such as lectures, discussions, films, and culture-general assimilators are used (Gudykunst, Guzley & Hammer, 1996, p. 66). Moreover, different concepts of culture such as those developed by Trompenaars (1993), Hofstede (2001) or House et al. (2004) may be explained.

Didactic and culture-specific approaches offer information about a specific culture. For example, country facts and historical backgrounds are imparted with similar methods used in didactic and culture-general training. Moreover, language and culture assimilator training may be applied (e.g., Thomas & Schenk, 2001; Petzold, Ringel & Thomas, 2005). A culture
assimilator is a collection of critical incidents. These are short reports describing situations, in which a problem pertaining to cultural adaptation or cultural differences between interacting parties occurred. Different descriptions are given, from which the trainees have to choose the best explanation considering the situation.

The aim of experiential and culture-general training is to let participants experience situations which might occur in real-life intercultural encounters. For this reason, several simulations and self-assessments such as BáFá BáFá, Barnga or Ecotonos have been developed (Shirts, 1995; Steinwachs, 1995; Hofner Saphiere 1995). Another culture-general simulation is Explanatorius, which is particularly aimed to assess and to train the communicative competence of the participants (Holtbrügge & Kittler, 2007).

Experiential and culture-specific training such as culture-specific simulations or role-plays, contrast-culture training and preliminary trips is aimed to let trainees experience the norms, values and symbols of a specific culture. The main difference to didactic training is that not only cognitive but also emotional and behavioural competences are imparted.

According to the content, work-related and private life-related training can be distinguished (e.g., Bennett, Aston & Colquhoun, 2000). Work-related training contains information about management aspects which are strongly influenced by culture such as leadership styles, organisational forms or motivation issues. It is aimed at enhancing the performance of managers in cross-cultural business interactions.

Private life related training takes into consideration that expatriates do not only work but also live in a foreign country. Often, they are accompanied by their families (Kittler, Holtbrügge & Ungar, 2006; Konopaske, Robie & Ivancevich, 2005). Therefore, questions regarding like accommodation, leisure, potential schools or healthcare services are raised. The aim of this
form of training is to enhance the overall well-being of individuals who live in other countries.

Finally, a distinction can be made according to location between training which takes place in traditional or in virtual classrooms (Rosenberg, 2001; Garrison & Anderson, 2003)). The first alternative is characterized by face-to-face interaction between trainer and trainee. This allows trainers to consider the individual expectations and learning-styles of the participants and to adjust training content and methods accordingly. Typically a large number of individuals meet at a given time and place.

The major advantage of training in virtual classrooms is their independence of these constraints. Participants may decide independently of others when and where the training takes place. However, the content of computer-based or web-based training has to be pre-programmed and is therefore highly standardized.

Although intercultural training is a main topic in the intercultural management literature, its use and impact is largely unclear. In a meta-analysis of 28 studies of the effectiveness of intercultural training, which were published between 1988 and 2000, Mendenhall et al. (2004) found that lectures, presentations, culture assimilators, and class discussions were the methods most often used for intercultural training. Given the predominantly didactic nature of these methods, most intercultural training is effective in enhancing knowledge and trainee satisfaction, but less effective in changing behaviour and attitudes and in improving adjustment and performance. However, the authors found a great number of non-significant findings, which indicates the need to investigate potential moderators of training effectiveness. One moderator might be the form of assignment, that is, whether the training is designed for real or virtual delegations.


**Methodology**

In order to get a deeper insight into the characteristics of virtual assignments and the particular requirements for intercultural training, a case study of the German software firm SAP was conducted. SAP was selected for our study because of its extensive experience with virtual assignments during the last few years. The sample consists of virtual assignees who have their office in Germany and who interact mainly with individuals in Asia (particularly in China, India, and Japan) as well as their counterparts in Japan.

Based on an explorative approach, nine semi-structured interviews with former and actual virtual assignees (computer specialists, team leaders and project managers), two Japanese SAP employees and four members of the Japanese customer’s project-team were conducted (in the following marked with interview A-N). The respondents located in Germany come from four different cultures and have experiences with all forms of virtual delegations of at least three years. They have experiences with traditional delegations as well. The interviews with the virtual assignees lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours and were conducted in the German language. The interviews in Japan lasted between one and three hours and were conducted in English.

In the beginning, the respondents were asked about the general aspects of their virtual assignment such as form, duration and intercultural management problems. Afterwards the specific aspects of intercultural training were discussed. The respondents were presented the typology of intercultural training which was developed in the previous section. Then they were asked to evaluate the efficiency of different training methods (didactic vs. experiential), contents (work-related vs. private life-related) and locations (traditional vs. virtual classroom) for virtual assignments. These alternatives were explained and presented in a neutral manner in order to reduce the danger of leading respondents to answer questions consistent with prior
expectations. Moreover, further measures to reduce possible interviewer bias and to ensure the explorative character of the study such as were applied. Particularly, the interviewers asked the interviewees to describe their views in their own words and made every effort to “move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the participant has begun to share” (Seidman 2006, S. 66).

Personal interviews were chosen for their particular advantages with regards to the study of virtual assignments. First, potential misunderstandings can be more easily recognized and rectified. Given the novelty of the topic, this advantage proved to be very important. In personal interviews, unexpected answers can be discussed and further study of particular aspects can be pursued. Additionally, the researcher gains insight into the conditions under which the respondents work which helps him/her to validate the interpretation of soft factors such as emotions, motivations and learning processes (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Flick, 2006). Especially in Japan “getting to know each other” and the development of personal relationships are important requirements for successful communication. As one Japanese interviewee mentioned: “You would have got only 20% of the information, if we did this by telephone or videoconference” (Interview NQ4).

All interviews were conducted in the presence of both authors. This allowed for a subsequent discussion and critical reflection of the respondents' statements from various perspectives. Moreover, the danger of misunderstandings and misinterpreting subjective perceptions is reduced, thus, encouraging the communicative validation of the findings. The interviews have been audio-taped, transcripted and computer-analysed by using the software program NVivo (Gibbs, 2002). In the following, all quotations from these interviews are marked with Q1-Qn.
Case Study: Virtual Assignments at SAP

Remote Services as Organizational Context

Virtual assignments are most relevant for companies which are involved in remote services. In contrast to traditional services, remote services are not produced in the physical presence of the customer. With the help of modern information and communication technologies it is possible to provide formerly local services over long distances as well as to incite new forms of services. No direct contact between service providers and their customers is needed. Many examples of remote services have already become part of our daily lives such as online IT-support or remote maintenance of technical equipment. In a more complex way, remote services are used in robotics or in medical technology. For example, in 2001, the first transatlantic surgery took place, when three surgeons in the U.S. operated on a patient in France (Schumann, Keller & Wangenheim, 2006, p. 3).

A typical example of remote services is the IT-support at a major German software company. The company is the world’s third-largest software provider and delivers business solutions around the world to more than 33,200 customers in 120 countries. The company employs 36,600 people in more than 50 countries. The headquarters is located in Germany, with subsidiaries, representation offices, and research centers in 50 countries (SAP, 2006).

The department “System Landscape Optimization” (SLO), which stands in the focus of this case study, employs 80 highly qualified IT-experts who support a large number of customers all over the world. One of these customers is a large Japanese retailer, for whom a new software release was installed in 2004 (SAP, 2005). The various departments of the company had their own IT systems with different versions and customized solutions of the standard software. These scratched systems caused many problems, for example, difficult access to information, hindrances in carrying out analyses concerning the entire company and the presence
of a large amount of hardware which used to be serviced. The goal of the project was to build up one new system where all information of the company is merged (“consolidation and migration in one step”).

The project followed a typical sequence of steps. At first, the present situation of the customers system(s) and organizational structure(s) were analysed. After that, a target system was defined and set up, into which all other existing systems had to be integrated. In a next step, the old systems were prepared for the merger. Afterwards, the preparation of the source system began, i.e., by cleaning up the existing data to avoid duplicate documents. During various test cycles parts of the source data were transferred onto the new system, followed by the last transfer. Finally, the system was checked in an intensive test before it was opened to the users again.

The whole project, from the first presentation of the concept to its final implementation, lasted one year. During that time, most tasks were managed from Germany where the core-project team was located. This multi-cultural team consisted of three Germans, two Dutchmen, one Spaniard and one Slovak. Further technical support was available in the headquarters as well. These technical specialists joined the team occasionally. A Japanese SAP employee acted as a contact person at the customer’s location. “The cooperation between Marubeni Corporation, the System Landscape Optimization group, SAP Japan, and SAP services was extremely efficient”, says the customer engagement manager at SAP Japan, Fumihiko Nichita, “and helped the consolidation project to become an overall success” (SAP, 2005).

**Communication and Service Delivery during the Project**

During the project, the core team was located in Germany most of the time and worked remotely from here. The first contact, before the project started and the customer had chosen SAP as a consultant, was face-to-face: “A member of the team presented the running order to
the customer in Japan” (Interview AQ2). To analyse the present situation of the customer’s systems and organizational structures, the team attained access to all files and applications via the web. At that point, the remote part of the project began. “It took us up to 50 days to analyse all systems. We did this remotely from Germany” (Interview AQ2).

Afterwards, the conclusions were again presented at the customer’s site in Japan by two team members. “After the remote analyses, we spent two weeks with the project team in Japan. During that time we had many meetings and further analyses in order to clarify most parts of the concept (…). The programming took seven to nine weeks. This was followed by the first simulation” (Interview AQ5). Subsequent to each simulation, a test by the customer was conducted. “We cannot test all functions of the system by ourselves, because we do not know which functions are used by the customer; therefore they have to test it on their own” (ibid.). This test was observed by several members of the project team. “During and after the test, we were on-site to discuss further procedures. We had three of those after-test-meetings in Japan. The first time we spent two weeks in Japan, then only a week each” (ibid.). Between those meetings, the team managed all different phases of the project without being on the spot. The final consolidation and migration of systems was conducted remotely as well.

The project manager described the communication between the project team and the Japanese client as follows: “On the project-management level, we communicated via our Japanese project member. [On the technical level], we had direct contact with the customer. However, [in emails to the Japanese technicians] we had 1,000 people at cc. [to inform everybody]” (Interview AQ8). “[Our] projects are a mixture of remote and on-site services, but we could accomplish them in the same way totally remotely (…). [To serve customers remotely] is a regular part of our work” (Interview AQ22).
Moreover, virtual assignments are often seen as more efficient, because “you can take your time over it and think about things in detail (...). It is sometimes even more difficult to be on the spot because you are under observation” (Interview BQ29).

Although remote services are the daily business for SAP, they contain several challenges as well. SAP gets full access to the customer’s systems via the web without being on location. This means that the customer is not able to control and to oversee comprehensively what SAP is actually doing, how the project is going on and which difficulties might occur. The customers described this situation as “black box. [As a consequence] we required lots of information about the on going process” (Interview MQ7). Given the sensibility of corporate data, a maximum level of trust between the two parties concerned is essential. Because personal contacts and face-to-face meetings are limited, this leads to extremely high requirements for the virtual delegates. Trust can only be built and maintained, if SAP is able to anticipate the expectations of their customers and to act accordingly. Since provider and customers come from different cultures, the recognition of cultural differences in values, attitudes and behaviour should be considered.

SAP discovered that, in order to build trust, communication with the customer is very important. “After the first simulation, the customer was really surprised how far we are in the project. After that, we knew we had to stay more in contact with each other (...). You cannot get the mood out of 5 emails. And you do not know what is most important for the customer at the moment” (Interview AQ9). After this experience, weekly “issue-lists and conference-calls” were introduced (Interview AQ11). Although the technical equipment was available, videoconferences were not used since the SAP project members learned that their Japanese counterparts were not accustomed to this media and did not feel very comfortable with it. Particularly, they found it easier to read and write in English than to speak in this language.
Generally, the respondents evaluated their experiences with virtual assignments very positively. In particular, the reduced necessity to travel abroad was mentioned. “Business travels are reduced; you need less time to travel back and forth” (Interview BQ31).

This lack of face-to-face communication, however, may also lead to misunderstandings. Particularly when tacit knowledge has to be transferred and complex problems have to be discussed, electronic media have their limits. “At the customers place, things get fixed more easily; to explain problems on the phone takes longer” (Interview BQ32).

Generally, our study indicates that the potential of intercultural misunderstandings is increasing in virtual assignments, since most of the communication is through electronic media. As one respondent mentioned: “Virtual work is different to on-site work. Especially in Asia, you do not experience the context in which a ‘yes’ was said” (Interview CQ20). Depending on the context, it can also mean ‘no’ or ‘maybe’ (Brahm, 2003).

**Requirements for Intercultural Training**

The interviews revealed that the company offers intercultural training to all of its employees, although there is no specific intercultural training for virtual assignees. Moreover, training attendance is voluntary. “I have heard about [intercultural] training, but have never been to any” (Interview BQ29). Despite this impediment, the respondents unanimously mentioned that intercultural training would have been useful and that several problems, which occurred during their virtual assignment could have been prevented. One respondent reports: “You need the same intercultural competencies as real expatriates. You need to know that you are calling a Japanese, you cannot see him or her, so, there is no need to take a bow but you still have to be able to interpret in the right way” (Interview IQ11). “You need to be sensitized for such [intercultural] situations; otherwise you do not know what the other person is trying to tell you” (Interview CQ20). If the virtual delegates had known more about the communication
Intercultural Training Requirements for Virtual Assignments

style and the information requirements of their Japanese counterparts beforehand, this time-consuming experience could have been avoided. Generally, our respondents argued that intercultural training could help to overcome the geographical and cultural distance and to enhance the ability of virtual assignees to communicate via electronic media. Thus, the following proposition can be derived:

Proposition 1: Intercultural training has a positive impact on the efficiency of virtual assignments.

Intercultural training, however, cannot be expected to be efficient per se. Virtual delegations have specific training requirements which differ from traditional foreign assignments. With reference to training content, two differences are particularly important, namely the lack of personal experiences in the foreign country and of face-to-face communication. As pointed out earlier, virtual assignees remain most of the time in their home country. Because of this spatial separation of private and business life no adjustment to the living conditions in the foreign country is necessary. Only adjustment to work-context is required. For example, virtual delegates do not have to learn how to use chopsticks, to greet people or to dress in a culturally appropriate way. In contrast to traditional expatriates virtual assignees will not experience hot summers in India, power cuts in China or crowded subways in Japan. One respondent reports: “I haven’t thought about an intercultural training as I was not supposed to go there on a business trip” (Interview FQ11). This statement reveals that intercultural training for virtual assignees should not be limited to issues which are important when living in another country. In contrast, they should concentrate on work-related aspects such as different perceptions of deadlines, decision-making processes or attitudes to work in an intercultural context. Indians, for example, view a delay or change of schedule upon short notice as normal. For a German virtual delegate this means a disruption of his or her pre-defined schedule,
causing anger and frustration. This might have been prevented if the delegate was aware of these differences and knew why understandings of time are different in other cultures.

With reference to the lack of face-to-face communication, training for virtual assignees should include information about new technologies such as videoconferences, chat rooms, blogs or WebEx-Sessions and their compatibility across national and organisational borders. In contrast, knowledge of important elements of face-to-face communication such as mimic and gestures or dress code is less relevant. One respondent mentioned: “That is the advantage of working remote: you do not need to look as neat as a pin every day” (Interview HQ15). In addition to learning new technologies, virtual delegates must be able to select the appropriate communication media according to the given task and cultural context they work in (“netiquette”) (Rosen, Furst & Blackburn, 2006). For example, training about different national cultures based on the works of Hofstede, Trompenaars and others might be provided (Duarte & Snyder, 2001). Particularly useful are information on different communication styles and communication training which takes into account the characteristics of electronic media. This is especially important for virtual delegates with intensive contacts to individuals from Asian cultures. As one respondent mentioned: “We did not call our Japanese customers spontaneously. Japanese get embarrassed very easily. Instead of this, we wrote emails or called our Japanese team member (…). It is very important that the Japanese do not lose their face” (Interview BQ16). Thus, the following proposition can be derived:

Proposition 2a: Intercultural training is the more efficient, the better the training content is adapted to the specific requirements of virtual assignments. Work-related content is more efficient than private life-related content. Moreover, information about electronic communication technologies and their culture-specific use is more efficient than information about face-to-face communication.
Our respondents did not indicate any preferences for particular training methods, that is how content will be imparted. However, it can be derived from the interviews that cognitive elements such as information about work-related aspects of other cultures and the culture-specific use of electronic media is indispensable. This can be imparted most efficiently by didactic methods such as lectures, presentations or fact sheets. Experiential methods, on the other hand, seem to be less important. In virtual assignments, through which tasks are managed from a distance, communication takes place mainly via electronic media. This offers the opportunity to reflect longer on possible answers and the use of expressions. Acting spontaneously in a culturally-adequate way is less important. One respondent described this as follows: “I like virtual work. It gives me the freedom to answer unhurriedly” (Interview CQ12). Moreover, virtual delegates often do not have much time to prepare for their assignment. Particularly, if the reason for their assignment is working on a temporary project instead of filling a permanent position in a foreign subsidiary, the preparation time is very short. As a consequence, an adequate intercultural training must be relatively short and flexible. Two respondents mentioned that a training which uses electronic media such as CDs or DVDs and which could be performed independently of time and location would be preferred. Moreover, internet platforms and chat rooms on intercultural topics might be useful. Generally, it can be proposed:

Proposition 2b: Intercultural training is the more efficient, the better the training methods are adapted to the specific requirements of virtual assignments. Didactic training is more efficient than experiential training. Moreover, training in virtual classrooms is more efficient than training in traditional classrooms.

Intercultural training has the greatest impact when they are offered not only to the virtual assignees, but also to their counterparts in the host country. As mentioned in the previous
section, one of the greatest challenges for virtual assignments is to avoid intercultural misunderstandings and to build trust without regular face-to-face contact. According to our interviews, a major source of misunderstandings is due to a lack of intercultural knowledge. For example, for the virtual expatriates, it appeared to be very difficult to understand the expectations of their Japanese counterparts and to learn about their communication style. It can be assumed that the Japanese SAP employees and customers perceived similar communication problems with the SAP employees in Germany. If all of them had been trained beforehand, these problems could have been at least partially avoided. One important objective of training is to standardize knowledge of all participants and to develop a common ground for them. Moreover, it enables them to learn about the cultural norms and values of their concrete counterparts. Consequently, intercultural training is particular efficient when it is attended by all participants of a virtual interaction. As one respondent mentioned: “In advance, both parts should be made sensitive to that” (Interview CQ30). This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 2c: Intercultural training is the more efficient, the more participants of the virtual interaction are involved.

Our interviews show evidence for the assumption that the impact of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments is moderated by several other variables. One important influence is the cultural distance between the virtual assignees and their counterparts in the host-country. Cultural distance can be defined as the mean difference of the norms, values and attitudes between two cultures (e.g., Kogut & Singh, 1988; Shenkar, 2001). For example, the respondents found it much easier to work together with Americans than with the Japanese. “Working remote is easy with Americans; they have the same cultural background” (Interview BQ30). “In a project with another customer, we have more problems. The project team consists of many Japanese SAP employees, with a lack of technical knowledge. We [the
virtual delegates] have the technical background, but do not know the Japanese culture. Once we told the customer what has to be done (...). Japanese always see the customer at least one hierarchical level above them. They would never talk to the customer in that way” (Interview DQ22).

Theoretically, this finding may be explained by the concept of high- and low-context cultures developed by Hall (1996). According to Hall, communication between the members of two cultures is more successful, the more similar the mindsets of the counterparts are. On the contrary, communication between one individual belonging to a high-context culture and another individual belonging to a low-context-culture may lead to misunderstandings. As a result, intercultural training as a way to overcome communication problems is particularly important when the cultural distance between the virtual delegates and their counterparts in the host-country is large:

Proposition 3a: The impact of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments is moderated by the cultural distance between the counterparts. The larger the cultural distance is, the more efficient is intercultural training.

Another moderator variable between intercultural training and the efficiency of virtual assignments is the international experience of the assignee. All interviewees in our study have long international experiences, so they felt well prepared for their virtual assignment and did not take part in any intercultural training beforehand. This finding is in accordance with the literature on traditional assignments, that intercultural training is the more important, the less internationally experienced the trainees are (e.g. Webb, 1996; Bennett, Aston & Colquhoun, 2000). In line with this, one respondent reported of a former colleague who had no previous international experience. “Once he talked to his [Asian] customers about the mistakes they
have made very directly. He did that in a great audience. The next day, nobody wanted to talk to him anymore.” Thus, it can be proposed:

Proposition 3b: The impact of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments is moderated by the former international experience of the counterparts. The less internationally experienced the virtual assignee is, the more efficient the intercultural training.

Finally, our study indicates that the impact of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments is moderated by their particular form. Long-term virtual expatriates, on the one hand, interact with individuals from one foreign culture over a period of at least one year. The virtual assignment is an important period in his or her work life and a major criterion for future job promotion. As a consequence, culture-specific training is essential for teaching of the characteristics corresponding to a particular culture. Virtual frequent flyers, as the other extreme case, switch permanently between interactions with individuals from several foreign cultures. Their basic requirement is not the adjustment to one particular culture, but the flexibility to interact simultaneously with members from different cultures. Moreover, the virtual delegation to different host-countries may occur rather spontaneously, so that detailed culture-specific trainings are not feasible. As one respondent remarked: “I worked (…) for the project [with Marubeni], but alongside you always work for smaller projects (…). You don’t know in which project you will be needed tomorrow” (Interview EQ5). Thus, it can be followed:

Proposition 3c: The impact of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments is moderated by the duration of virtual assignments. The longer the virtual assignment lasts, the more efficient are culture-specific elements.
Summarizing the main results of our case study, there is a strong indication that intercultural training has a positive impact on the efficiency of virtual assignments. However, the adaptation of training contents, methods and participants to the specific requirements of virtual assignments is necessary. Moreover, we found arguments that the impact of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments is moderated by the cultural distance between the home- and the host-country, the degree of international experience attained by the assignee and the particular form of the assignment. Our propositions regarding the influence of intercultural training on the efficiency of virtual assignments are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2:
Summary of research propositions
Contributions, Limitations and Implications for Future Studies

This study is the first to analyse the requirements for intercultural training within the field of virtual assignments. It suggests that virtual delegations are characterized by several intercultural management problems such as a lack of face-to-face communication, different time zones and communication styles as well as language barriers and the lack of common trust-building mechanisms. Intercultural training is perceived as a useful instrument for overcoming these challenges. It is particularly important because virtual delegates cannot learn through their own observations of and experiences with other cultures. Thus, a mediated form of learning through intercultural training is needed. However, this has to be adapted to the specific requirements of virtual expatriates. E.g., work-related content and information about electronic communication should be provided, most preferably in virtual classrooms which allow virtual delegates to learn independent of time and space. Moreover, intercultural training should not only be offered to the virtual delegates themselves, but also to their team members in the home country as well as to the individuals with whom they interact in the host country. As this study illustrates, even leading companies in the area of virtual and remote work have only taken the first steps in this direction.

A concrete suggestion for intercultural training which can be derived from this study and which takes into consideration our propositions concerning training content, methods and participants is to improve electronic communication skills in an intercultural context. For example, a group of employees who are involved in a virtual delegation could be asked to write an email about a given topic to all other group members. In this email, a certain degree of urgency (very urgent, neutral, less urgent) and mood (friendly, neutral, unfriendly) should be expressed. The receivers should not know about the particular content of these instructions. Afterwards, they would be asked how they perceived the urgency and the mood of the mail. A
comparison between intentions and perceptions could lead to a discussion about different communication styles and could help the participants to formulate emails which are better understood in a different cultural context.

While this study made several contributions to the state of knowledge on virtual assignments in general and on training requirements in particular, it has several limitations as well. First, it is restricted to virtual delegates from Germany who interact with business partners in Asia. It is possible that virtual delegates working with individuals in other countries perceive other training requirements. Second, we analyzed virtual delegations in the context of remote services, only. While within this field virtual delegations are very common it is unclear whether the results may be transferred to other industries and organizational backgrounds. Even within this industry, differences between SAP – the company focused on in this case study – and other firms may be observed. Moreover, this study is based on a small number of respondents who are, however, extremely experienced in the field of virtual delegations.

From a methodological point of view, the explorative approach of this study proved to be very suitable. All interviewed virtual assignees responded very openly and in great detail to our questions. As one respondent mentioned, the interviews allowed them to reflect on their own work and to think about possible changes. In particular, specific training programs for virtual delegates at SAP are now under consideration.

Since virtual delegations are expected to continue gaining significance in the future, companies should invest in the analysis of intercultural management issues and intercultural trainings. In the next years for SAP - as well as for many other companies - virtual delegation is set to become a main topic of human resource management. Hence, further studies should broaden the scope of research and extend its focus to other industries and organizational contexts where virtual assignments are common. Moreover, quantitative studies may enhance the
representativeness of this study and analyse the influence of further variables on the country, firm and individual level. For such studies, our research propositions may be seen as a starting point for the refinement and further testing of hypotheses.
Bibliography


