

Cross-Cultural Communication in Globally Distributed Virtual Teams

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Abstract

Globally distributed virtual teams have become an important organizational mechanism for coordinating expertise across countries, cultures, languages, institutions, and time zones. Their geographical flexibility can enhance access to specialized talent and diverse perspectives, yet physical separation removes many contextual cues that ordinarily help individuals interpret meaning, establish trust, manage disagreement, and coordinate work. Cultural differences in communication directness, hierarchy, language proficiency, feedback, silence, relationship formation, and time orientation can consequently become amplified when collaboration occurs predominantly through digital channels. This study examines how cross-cultural communication capability influences communication clarity, interpersonal trust, knowledge sharing, coordination quality, conflict management, and overall effectiveness in globally distributed virtual teams.

Because verified primary data were not supplied, the manuscript employs an explicitly labeled simulation-based comparative design. A synthetic dataset representing 180 global virtual teams and 1,080 modeled team members was constructed across three communication conditions: unstructured virtual communication, standardized digital coordination, and culturally adaptive communication. The results indicate that technology standardization alone improves modeled outcomes, but the strongest performance occurs when technological routines are integrated with cultural intelligence, communication accommodation, inclusive language practices, explicit coordination norms, asynchronous flexibility, and trust-building mechanisms. The culturally adaptive condition achieves simulated scores of 84 for communication clarity, 82 for trust, 86 for knowledge sharing, and 83 for overall team effectiveness, compared with 58, 55, 60, and 57 respectively under unstructured communication.

The study argues that effective global virtual collaboration is not primarily a technology problem. It is a sociocultural coordination challenge mediated by technology. Organizations should therefore develop communication systems that combine cultural intelligence, linguistic inclusion, temporal fairness, psychological safety, explicit norms, and appropriately matched synchronous and asynchronous communication. The proposed framework provides testable propositions for future empirical investigation of distributed multicultural work.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; global virtual teams; cultural intelligence; virtual collaboration; team trust; knowledge sharing; intercultural communication; distributed work



1. Introduction

Globally distributed virtual teams bring together employees, consultants, researchers, managers, and specialists who collaborate toward common objectives while being separated by national borders, physical distance, and frequently time zones. Digital communication technologies make such collaboration operationally possible, but connectivity does not automatically produce effective teamwork. A recent integrative review of global virtual work identified global virtual teams as one of the most mature domains of international virtual-work research, while a 2025 communication-focused review of 51 empirical studies emphasized the continuing importance of communication and culture to global virtual-team operations. The fundamental organizational challenge is therefore no longer simply whether dispersed employees can communicate, but whether they can create shared meaning when linguistic, cultural, technological, and temporal conditions differ.

Cross-cultural communication becomes particularly complex because apparently ordinary workplace behaviors can carry different meanings across cultural environments. Direct disagreement may be interpreted as efficiency in one context and disrespect in another; silence may represent consent, reflection, uncertainty, or reluctance to challenge authority; rapid decision making may signal competence to one member while appearing insufficiently consultative to another. Earlier research on culturally diverse global virtual teams showed that individual cultural values influence perceptions of team processes and outcomes, while contemporary scholarship continues to identify communication, culture, and intercultural adaptation as central to virtual collaboration. Digital communication can intensify these interpretive difficulties because nonverbal information, informal interaction, and contextual cues are often reduced or unevenly transmitted.

Language adds another layer of complexity. Global teams commonly operate through a shared corporate language that may be a first language for some members and an additional language for others. Presbitero demonstrated that foreign-language anxiety can create cognitive demands that influence individual task performance in global virtual teams, while cultural intelligence can help individuals navigate such communication conditions. Later work on communication accommodation found that culturally intelligent team members are better positioned to adapt their communication behavior in ways that support interpersonal process effectiveness. Language proficiency should therefore not be interpreted simply as grammatical competence; effective global communication also depends on vocabulary choice, pace, accent accommodation, confirmation of meaning, turn-taking, and willingness to clarify misunderstanding without imposing social penalties.

Temporal and technological differences further complicate cross-cultural interaction. Members working across substantial time-zone differences may have limited overlapping work hours, creating dependence on asynchronous communication and delayed responses. Taras, Stahl, Gunkel, and Kraemer argue that temporal diversity in global virtual teams involves more than time-zone distance because team members also differ in preferred work times and chronotypes, creating multiple sources of temporal asynchrony. At the same time, research on global virtual teamwork shows that simply increasing the variety or frequency of information and communication technologies does not necessarily improve effectiveness; social capital and relationship quality mediate how technological resources become useful. Technology therefore provides communication capacity, whereas social and cultural processes determine how effectively that capacity is used.



The present study develops an integrated framework for understanding these relationships. Instead of treating cultural diversity, language, technology, trust, and time-zone dispersion as isolated challenges, it conceptualizes cross-cultural virtual teamwork as a dynamic communication system. The central proposition is that team effectiveness improves when organizations move from unstructured digital interaction toward culturally adaptive communication, combining cultural intelligence, explicit communication norms, language inclusion, trust-building, communication accommodation, temporal fairness, and deliberate selection of communication media. Because no verified organizational dataset was supplied, the paper uses simulation rather than fabricated empirical claims. The simulated analysis is designed to generate theoretically grounded propositions that can subsequently be evaluated through real multinational organizational data.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges

The first objective is to identify the principal communication difficulties affecting globally distributed virtual teams and to evaluate how cultural differences interact with language, technological mediation, and temporal separation.

The study focuses on:

- differences in communication directness and interpretation;
- foreign-language anxiety and linguistic asymmetry;
- reduced access to nonverbal and contextual cues;
- time-zone and response-time differences;
- different expectations regarding hierarchy, participation, and feedback;
- misunderstanding during conflict and decision making; and
- unequal opportunities to contribute during virtual interaction.

2.2 To Assess the Role of Cultural Adaptation and Trust

The second objective is to examine whether culturally adaptive communication is associated with stronger communication clarity, interpersonal trust, psychological safety, knowledge sharing, conflict management, and coordination effectiveness.

Research on global virtual teams increasingly emphasizes cultural intelligence as an enabling capability. Anglani and colleagues proposed an expanded framework combining cross-cultural and digital abilities for professionals operating in global virtual environments, while Richter and colleagues showed that configurations of cultural intelligence and social integration are associated with performance in global virtual teams.

2.3 To Develop an Integrated Virtual-Team Communication Model

The third objective is to compare three organizational approaches:

Unstructured virtual communication, in which team members use digital tools without systematically established cross-cultural norms;

Standardized digital coordination, in which communication platforms, meeting schedules, documentation routines, and task-management processes are standardized; and Culturally adaptive



communication, in which technological coordination is supplemented with cultural intelligence, linguistic inclusion, communication accommodation, temporal fairness, explicit conflict norms, and trust-building practices.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Cultural Intelligence, Language, and Communication Accommodation

Cultural intelligence has become an important concept for understanding effectiveness in culturally diverse work environments because it concerns an individual's capacity to interpret and adapt to unfamiliar cultural contexts. Its relevance becomes especially pronounced in virtual teams, where fewer contextual cues are available to correct inaccurate assumptions.

Mockaitis, Rose, and Zettinig examined 43 culturally diverse global virtual teams and demonstrated that individual cultural values are meaningfully connected with team processes and outcomes. Their findings challenged simplistic treatments of national culture by showing that team-level interaction depends on the cultural orientations brought by individual members.

Presbitero subsequently examined foreign-language skills, anxiety, cultural intelligence, and individual task performance in global virtual teams. The study showed why communication difficulty cannot be reduced to whether a participant technically speaks the working language. Foreign-language anxiety creates additional cognitive load, potentially diverting mental resources away from complex task performance, while cultural intelligence can assist members in adapting to culturally diverse interaction.

Communication accommodation provides another explanatory mechanism. Presbitero's later study found that cultural intelligence contributes to communication accommodation and that such adaptation supports interpersonal process effectiveness within global virtual teams. Accommodation may involve slowing speech, avoiding unexplained idioms, confirming interpretation, modifying directness, allowing additional response time, summarizing decisions, or adjusting interaction style according to the needs of colleagues.

Richter, Martin, Hansen, Taras, and Alon further demonstrated that cultural intelligence should not be treated as an isolated individual characteristic. Their analysis linked motivational configurations of cultural intelligence with social integration and performance in global virtual teams. This supports the view that culturally competent communication contributes to effectiveness partly through relationship-building processes.

Recent reviews consolidate these findings. Liu's 2025 review of 51 empirical studies concluded that communication and culture remain deeply interconnected in global virtual-team functioning. Cultural competence therefore needs to be embedded within organizational communication practices rather than addressed only through one-time diversity training.

3.2 Trust, Knowledge Sharing, and Conflict Management

Trust presents a distinctive challenge in virtual teams because members often lack prolonged face-to-face interaction and informal workplace contact. Early trust judgments may therefore be constructed from response reliability, task completion, communication consistency, competence signals, and adherence to commitments.

Yu, Shen, Cheng, and Bao's longitudinal investigation of cross-cultural virtual learning teams demonstrated that collaboration changes over time. Their findings showed the relevance of swift trust, developing team trust, and shared mental models across different stages of virtual-team development. Trust should consequently be treated as an evolving team process rather than a fixed starting condition.

Cultural intelligence also matters for conflict. Davaei, Gunkel, Veglio, and Taras examined cultural and emotional intelligence in global virtual teams and found meaningful relationships with interpersonal, task, and process conflict as well as performance outcomes. This is important because disagreement is not inherently damaging. Task disagreement can contribute to analysis and innovation when members can interpret one another accurately and remain psychologically safe. The problem arises when cultural or linguistic misunderstanding transforms task disagreement into interpersonal tension.

Knowledge sharing depends on similar processes. A globally dispersed team may contain extensive expertise while failing to benefit from that expertise if communication conditions discourage members from asking questions, disagreeing with senior colleagues, exposing uncertainty, or contributing in a non-native language.

Heubeck, Storz, and Meckl tested global virtual teamwork through a social-capital framework using questionnaire data from 271 technologically aware companies in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Their results indicate that ICT use by itself is insufficient for effective global virtual teamwork and that structural, cognitive, and relational social capital matter for translating digital connectivity into effective collaboration.

3.3 Temporal Distance, Media Choice, and Global Virtual-Team Effectiveness

Virtual-team barriers extend beyond culture. Morrison-Smith and Ruiz's literature review identified geographical, temporal, and perceived distance among the recurrent challenges affecting virtual teams. These forms of distance frequently interact. A delayed message may be caused by a time-zone difference, but it can be interpreted through cultural expectations concerning urgency, commitment, hierarchy, or politeness.

Taras and colleagues argue that conventional research on temporal diversity has often considered individual timing variables separately. Their framework emphasizes the need to account simultaneously for time-zone differences and team members' temporal preferences. This observation has important practical implications because a formally equal meeting schedule can still create unequal burdens if one geographical subgroup repeatedly attends meetings late at night or early in the morning.

Digital media also differ in their usefulness for particular tasks. Complex disagreement, emotionally sensitive feedback, or ambiguous strategic decisions may benefit from richer synchronous communication, whereas documentation, technical explanations, status updates, and reflective contributions can often be more inclusive when handled asynchronously.

Muehlfeld and colleagues' 2021 study of foreign-language use and virtuality offers an important nuance: foreign-language use can impair creative team performance, but stronger foreign-language proficiency mitigates the effect, and virtual interaction may under some conditions create cognitive advantages by allowing greater time for information processing. Asynchronous communication should therefore not automatically be viewed as an inferior substitute for face-to-face or synchronous

communication. For multilingual teams, written asynchronous interaction can provide time to translate, reflect, formulate precise contributions, and review earlier messages.

The research gap lies in integrating these factors. Much of the literature examines cultural intelligence, language, trust, temporal diversity, technology, conflict, or social capital separately. The present study proposes that team effectiveness depends on how these elements are assembled into a coherent communication architecture.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Simulated Sample

This study employs a simulation-based comparative research design. No actual employees were surveyed or experimentally assigned to communication conditions.

The simulated dataset represents 180 globally distributed virtual teams containing 1,080 team members, with an average of six members per team. Each team is modeled as containing members located in at least three national or cultural environments.

The teams were equally allocated to three hypothetical communication conditions:

- 60 unstructured virtual-communication teams;
- 60 standardized digital-coordination teams; and
- 60 culturally adaptive communication teams.

The simulation does not attempt to reproduce a particular company, country, industry, or proprietary collaboration system.

4.2 Variables and Measurement Framework

Six primary dimensions were modeled on standardized 0–100 scales.

Table 1: Methodological Framework and Operationalization

Variable	Operational Meaning	Modeled Indicators
Communication clarity	Degree to which messages are understood consistently	message precision, confirmation, ambiguity reduction
Cultural adaptation	Ability to adjust communication across cultural contexts	cultural intelligence, accommodation, perspective taking
Team trust	Confidence in colleagues' reliability and intentions	responsiveness, commitment, dependability
Knowledge sharing	Willingness and ability to exchange expertise	information exchange, questioning, documentation
Coordination quality	Ability to align tasks across distance and time	response protocols, handovers, time-zone planning
Team effectiveness	Overall collaborative outcome	decision quality, completion reliability, collaborative performance



Source note: The framework was informed by research on cultural intelligence, communication accommodation, social integration, virtual-team barriers, social capital, and temporal diversity.

4.3 Simulation Procedure and Analytical Strategy

The simulation was constructed around three progressively developed communication architectures.

In the unstructured condition, teams possess access to video conferencing, instant messaging, email, and shared files but lack consistent protocols for language inclusion, response times, meeting rotation, documentation, conflict escalation, or culturally adaptive communication.

In the standardized coordination condition, teams use formalized digital practices such as common channels, decision logs, meeting agendas, defined response expectations, shared documentation, and scheduled collaboration windows.

In the culturally adaptive condition, standardized coordination is supplemented by:

- cultural-intelligence development;
- explicit communication accommodation;
- plain and inclusive shared-language practices;
- rotating time-zone inconvenience;
- asynchronous contribution opportunities;
- clarification rather than assumption;
- culturally sensitive conflict protocols;
- documentation of decisions and rationales;
- psychological safety for clarification and dissent; and
- periodic review of communication norms.

Descriptive comparative analysis was used because the values are simulated. No inferential statistics, *p* values, confidence intervals, or population effect sizes are reported, since doing so could create a false impression of empirical sampling.

5. Analysis

5.1 Comparative Communication Outcomes

The simulation produces a clear progression across the three communication conditions.

Table 2: Simulated Outcomes Across Virtual-Team Communication Conditions

Outcome Dimension	Unstructured Communication	Standardized Digital Coordination	Culturally Adaptive Communication
Communication clarity	58	72	84
Team trust	55	69	82
Knowledge sharing	60	74	86
Coordination quality	56	76	85
Conflict-management	52	70	81



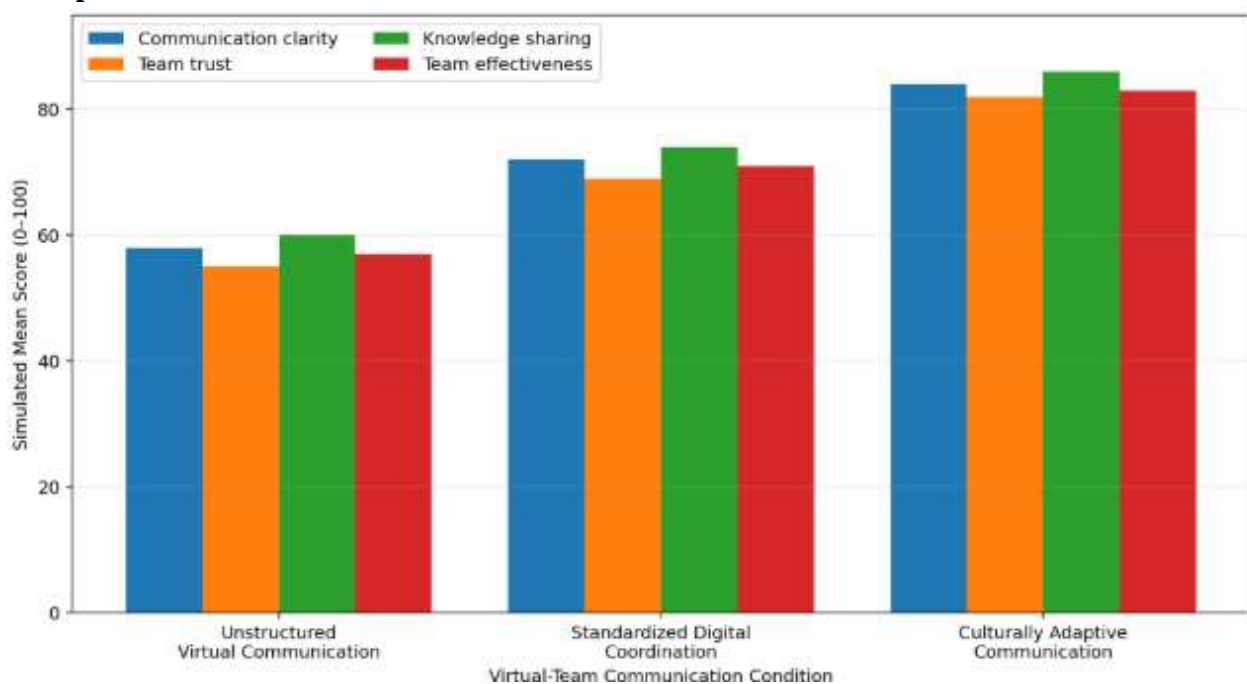
Outcome Dimension	Unstructured Communication	Standardized Digital Coordination	Culturally Adaptive Communication
effectiveness			
Overall team effectiveness	57	71	83

Note: Values are synthetic scores from 0–100 and do not represent observations from actual employees. The transition from unstructured communication to standardized coordination produces substantial simulated improvements. Communication clarity increases from 58 to 72, while team effectiveness rises from 57 to 71.

This pattern indicates that formal communication infrastructure matters. Shared documentation, predictable channels, defined response expectations, meeting discipline, and coordination routines reduce unnecessary ambiguity even without extensive cultural adaptation. The largest improvements, however, occur under culturally adaptive communication. Knowledge sharing reaches 86, coordination quality 85, communication clarity 84, team effectiveness 83, trust 82, and conflict-management effectiveness 81. The modeled results therefore support a layered interpretation: Technology enables interaction. Structure organizes interaction. Cross-cultural capability improves the quality of interaction.

5.2 Graphical Comparison of Communication Conditions

Graph 1: Simulated Outcomes Across Cross-Cultural Virtual Communication Conditions



The graph illustrates four central outcomes.

The unstructured condition performs weakest across every dimension. This does not imply that teams cannot operate informally, but rather that geographical, cultural, linguistic, and temporal complexity increases the cost of leaving communication norms implicit. Standardized digital coordination produces meaningful improvement because predictability reduces process uncertainty.

The culturally adaptive condition generates the strongest modeled outcomes because it addresses not only where and when communication occurs but also how meaning is interpreted across cultural differences. Key Finding: The simulation suggests that cultural adaptation creates value above and beyond technological standardization.

5.3 Interpreting the Cultural-Communication Effect

The increase in trust from 55 under unstructured communication to 82 under culturally adaptive communication deserves particular attention.

Trust in virtual teams cannot rely extensively on physical proximity. Team members infer trustworthiness through observable communication behavior. A colleague who responds predictably, explains delays, acknowledges misunderstanding, shares information openly, fulfills commitments, and treats cultural differences respectfully provides repeated signals of reliability. Cross-cultural competence strengthens these signals because it reduces misattribution.

For example, a brief written response may be interpreted as efficient by one member and dismissive by another. A delayed disagreement may indicate careful reflection rather than avoidance. Reluctance to interrupt a leader may reflect hierarchy expectations rather than absence of ideas. Culturally adaptive teams make these differences discussable.

Knowledge sharing exhibits an even larger modeled improvement, rising from 60 to 86. This pattern is consistent with research showing the importance of intercultural communication effectiveness, cultural intelligence, social integration, and social capital for collaboration in global virtual teams.

6. Discussion

6.1 Cross-Cultural Communication as a Team Capability

The analysis supports treating cross-cultural communication as a team capability rather than a collection of interpersonal etiquette rules.

Organizations sometimes approach intercultural competence through generalized descriptions of national cultures. Such frameworks can offer useful starting points, but excessive reliance on national averages risks stereotyping individual employees. Effective teams require a more adaptive approach.

Cultural intelligence is useful precisely because it emphasizes observation, interpretation, reflection, motivation, and behavioral adjustment rather than rigid assumptions. Presbitero's communication-accommodation research shows how culturally intelligent team members can modify communication behavior to improve interpersonal processes. Anglani and colleagues similarly argue that contemporary project professionals require both digital and cross-cultural capabilities.

An effective global-team member should therefore be capable of saying:

- "I may be interpreting this through my own communication norms."
- "Could you clarify what you mean by urgent?"



- “Would written input give everyone a better opportunity to contribute?”
- “Let me summarize the decision so we can confirm that we understood it in the same way.”

These behaviors transform cultural awareness into operational communication practice.

6.2 Trust, Psychological Safety, and Linguistic Inclusion

Globally distributed teams also need to recognize the hidden power differences created by language.

When one working language dominates, native or highly fluent speakers can communicate faster, interrupt more easily, use humor more confidently, and formulate spontaneous arguments with less cognitive effort. Less fluent colleagues may possess equivalent technical knowledge while contributing less during rapid synchronous discussions.

Presbitero's work demonstrates the relevance of foreign-language anxiety and its relationship with task performance in GVTs. Muehlfeld and colleagues further show that foreign-language proficiency influences the relationship between language use and creative team performance.

Linguistic inclusion therefore requires more than declaring a common corporate language.

Practical adaptations include:

- distributing agendas in advance;
- avoiding unexplained idioms and culturally specific humor in critical decisions;
- allowing written responses after meetings;
- summarizing decisions in plain language;
- providing asynchronous channels for complex contributions;
- checking understanding without embarrassing individual members; and
- separating language fluency from judgments of professional competence.

These practices also improve psychological safety because clarification becomes an expected team behavior rather than evidence of weakness.

Trust develops further when teams behave predictably. Yu and colleagues' longitudinal work shows the significance of swift trust, developing team trust, and shared mental models across the team lifecycle. Leaders should consequently treat early communication routines as investments in future collaboration rather than administrative details.

6.3 Temporal Fairness and Deliberate Media Choice

Time-zone diversity is frequently treated as a scheduling inconvenience, but it is also an inclusion issue. A global team may technically accommodate all members while repeatedly placing late-night or early-morning meeting burdens on the same location. Over time, such patterns can influence participation, fatigue, informal access to leaders, and perceived status. Taras and colleagues' work on temporal diversity demonstrates why global-team coordination should consider multiple forms of temporal asynchrony rather than time-zone difference alone.

A fair virtual-team system should therefore rotate unavoidable inconvenient meeting times rather than institutionalizing inconvenience for one region. Not every interaction should be synchronous.

A culturally adaptive team can match the medium to the communication task:

- Synchronous video or voice is particularly useful for ambiguous strategic discussions, sensitive conflict, relationship building, negotiation, and problems requiring rapid reciprocal clarification.



- Asynchronous written communication is particularly useful for documentation, detailed technical reasoning, multilingual participation, cross-time-zone coordination, status reporting, and decisions requiring reflection.
- Shared collaborative documents can reduce information asymmetry by providing a persistent record of knowledge.
- Short recorded explanations can support members unable to attend a live meeting while preserving contextual information absent from brief written messages.
- The goal is not maximum communication frequency. It is appropriate communication richness, accessibility, and timing.

7. Conclusion

Globally distributed virtual teams have transformed organizational collaboration by enabling expertise to be coordinated across countries and geographical boundaries. Yet geographical flexibility introduces communication conditions that conventional colocated teams experience less intensely.

Cultural differences influence how members interpret directness, disagreement, hierarchy, silence, trust, deadlines, participation, feedback, and interpersonal relationships. Linguistic differences influence cognitive effort and opportunities for spontaneous contribution. Time-zone differences shape who can participate synchronously and at what personal cost. Technological platforms determine which communication cues are available and how easily information can be revisited.

These factors are interconnected.

These scores are not empirical estimates. They illustrate a theoretically grounded proposition that should be tested using real organizational data. The central conclusion is that organizations should resist technological determinism in virtual-team management. Purchasing better collaboration software does not automatically create better collaboration. Heubeck and colleagues' empirical study similarly shows that ICT usage by itself is not sufficient for effective global virtual teamwork and that social capital plays an important role in converting technological resources into team effectiveness.

Successful globally distributed collaboration requires three mutually reinforcing layers:

- Digital capability provides reliable communication channels.
- Coordination capability creates predictable processes and shared working structures.
- Cross-cultural communication capability enables people to interpret difference, adapt communication, develop trust, exchange knowledge, manage disagreement, and participate equitably.
- Organizations should therefore build global-team systems around cultural intelligence, communication accommodation, linguistic inclusion, temporal fairness, explicit norms, psychological safety, shared documentation, and intentional use of synchronous and asynchronous communication.

The implication for leadership is equally important. Leaders of global virtual teams are not simply supervisors operating through digital tools. They are architects of the communication environment. They determine whose voice is heard, which misunderstandings are clarified, how inconvenience is distributed, how disagreement is interpreted, and whether cultural diversity becomes a source of learning or a source of fragmentation.



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