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November 2nd, 2021

Combining technology with human resources management to strengthen virtual teams

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*Technology tools that best fit work tasks based on time and geography needs can encourage knowledge sharing, trust building and socialisation. **Clark Shah-Nelson** and **Heather A. Johnson** write that these tools, in combination with human resource management policies related to hiring, induction, training, and on-going appraisal practices can improve the performance of virtual teams.*

While many companies and organisations were at least **partially relying on telework** prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, many more were forced into working as virtual teams and didn't have guidance for productively doing so. The prolonged crisis is now challenging how productivity can be enhanced or sustained due to pandemic weariness settling in as of the last quarter of 2021. We explore our learnings prior to the onset of

COVID-19 and the evolution of the research as the pandemic made inroads into how virtual teams share knowledge while enhancing productivity in remote settings. Our research question was: *how do virtual teams overcome issues of time and geographic location to share knowledge and maintain productivity?*

Our study

We conducted a **systematic review of 21 articles** that span global virtual team cultural contexts covering more than 40 countries, sectors, and industries (see below). We coded the studies to highlight key themes for analysis across articles.

Figure 1. Articles reviewed by country

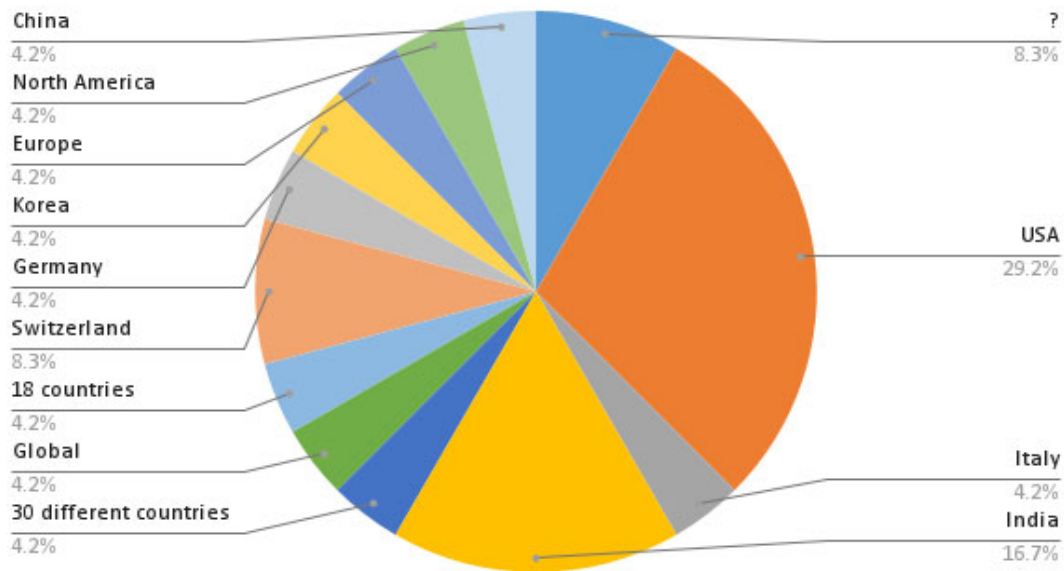
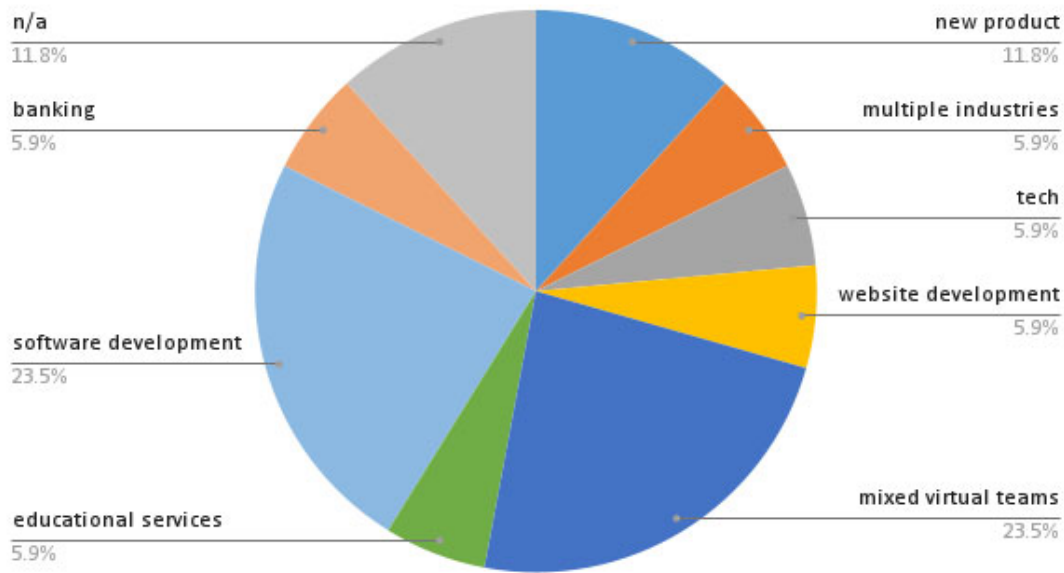


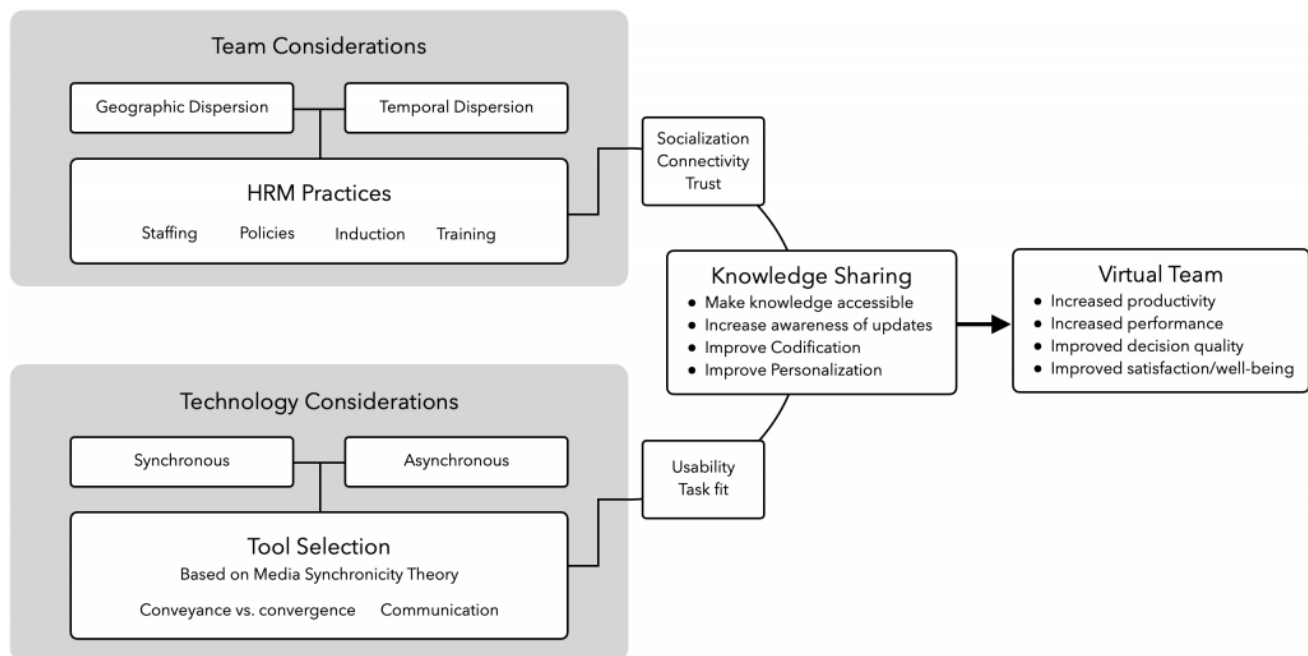
Figure 2. Articles reviewed by industry type



Summarised research conceptual model

The summarised research conceptual model below shows the two key themes that emerged: the importance of certain human resource management (HRM) practices, and of the selection of technology tools for the team based on factors of geography and time. Virtual teams need to be able to collaborate and share knowledge using tools that **overcome issues of time and geography**. Key drivers of how knowledge is shared in a virtual setting are related to informing others or decision-making. This in turn determines if synchronous or asynchronous tools are most appropriate.

Figure 3. Conceptual model



HRM practices for high functioning virtual teams

Human resource management plays a vital role in the formation (hiring process), on-boarding (induction, team building, socialisation) and on-going practices and policies for virtual teams (performance evaluations). During each phase of the workforce life cycle, HRM can influence outcomes of virtual teams with the following summarised tips from the literature:

Formation

- **Define roles and job descriptions** that include setting expectations for virtual team practices, communication/collaboration culture in the organisation and assessing **individual virtual competencies (IVCs)**.
- Include questions throughout the interview process that further communicate baseline practices and policies around communication and knowledge sharing (frequency, type, availability, hours, flexibility).
- Assess each position in terms of the overarching project goals, timelines, deadlines, and deliverables. (Do these lend themselves to asynchronous collaboration or do they demand less time lag that might require workers to either work in proximal time zones or be willing to work odd/night time hours in order to **more closely match hours for teammates around the globe?**)

On-boarding and norming

- Build team trust and comfort through socialisation and connectivity. The research **recommended at least some collocated face-to-face time**, early in the induction process, as it is the quickest way to help people get to know one another and start to build trust within the team.
- Include both collocated/in-person time and virtual team building during on-boarding, if possible, to foster socialisation and opportunities for further trust-building with one another.
- Teams should discuss and **come to consensus on standards for communication**. It is critical to discuss and agree upon communication/collaboration standards related to availability, acknowledgement of messages, expectations for responses, when/why/how to use certain technology tools to establish team norms.

- Identify **knowledge gaps**. Knowledge sharing **has been found** to have a strong link to virtual team success.
- Provide extensive training for any gaps in technology tool usage or knowledge sharing and communication practices.

Performance evaluations

- Define metrics for, and foster a transparent culture of, appraisal. HR, managers, and employees should all be aware of the competencies and expectations.
- Since knowledge sharing is associated with virtual team effectiveness, **assessing** how often, how well and how thoroughly employees share and transfer knowledge is vital.
- **Assessment of employee attitudes** toward knowledge sharing is important at evaluation periods.
- Help teams actively and productively share knowledge through offering **incentives**. These may be tied to the appraisal process and can include things like **bonuses or gift cards**.

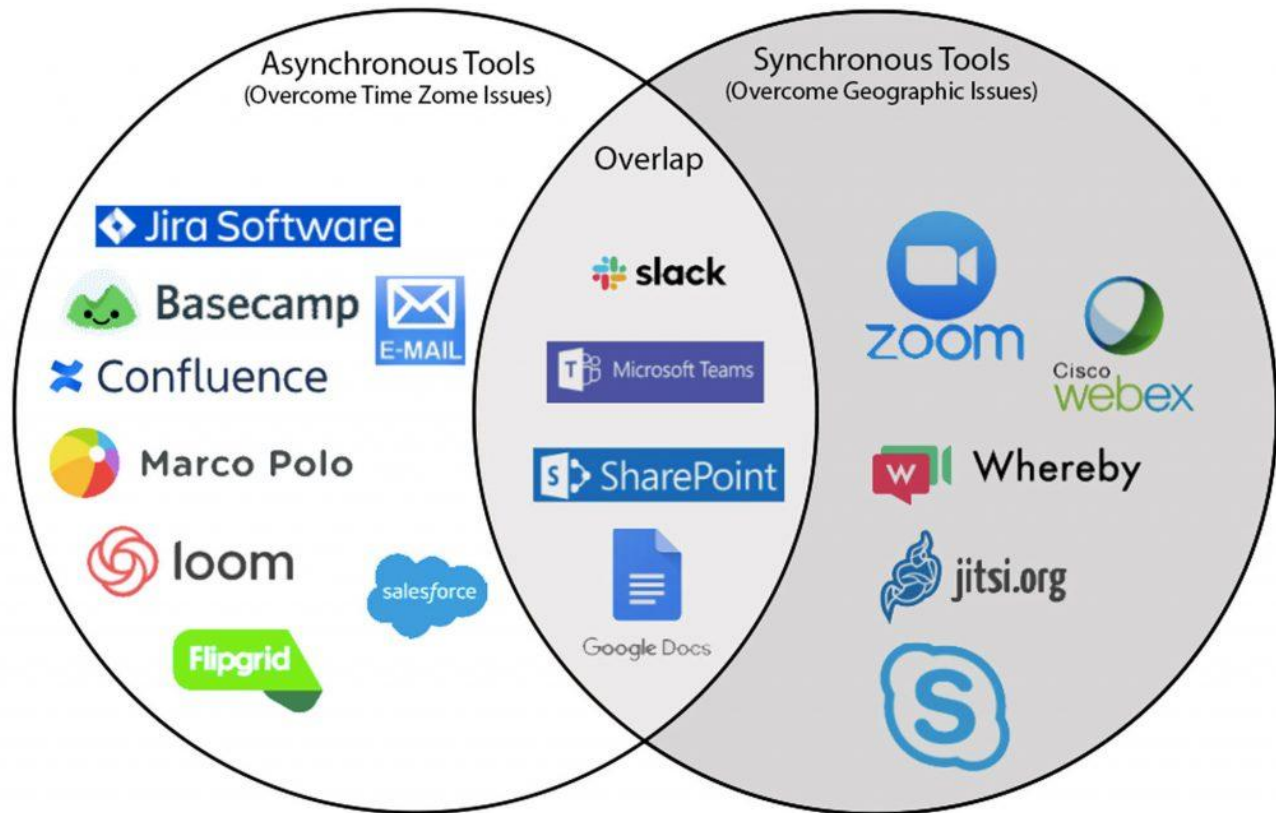
Importance of technology tool selection: synchronous or asynchronous?

Virtual teams need to be able to collaborate and share knowledge using tools that **overcome issues of time and geography** and need to examine their **geographical** and time-based needs to establish which mix of synchronous and asynchronous tools are the best fit. Two key theories that can help organisations figure out the appropriate technology are media synchronicity and technology task fit. **Synchronicity Media Theory** helps drive the choice of tools based on the purpose of the communication. Email, as an asynchronous tool, is most often best for broadcasting information, but it is far worse for decision-making or complex communications. Synchronous tools, like videoconferencing or instant messaging are typically better for discussing and gaining consensus. The research furthermore showed that time lag **can hinder decision-making**. Teams need to carefully consider the work, the purposes of communication, and their tasks to make sure they are choosing **technology tools fit their tasks**.

The diagram below shows a number of commonly used tools among virtual teams that span both asynchronous and synchronous usage, as well as tools that overlap – which

can be used either synchronously or asynchronously:

Figure 4. Tools virtual teams use to overcome time/geography issues



Summarised tips

- When having meetings by videoconference, open the room at least 10 minutes prior to start and also keep open after the meeting for folks to socialise.
- To build team connectedness, **start meetings with a quick ice breaker** that allows team members to show their personality, interests, and other things they care about.
- Leave a videoconference room and/or instant message channel open all day so that people can drop in/out as needed for quick consensus building, idea sharing, water cooler chat or socialisation.
- Share with the team how to use synchronous tools asynchronously (Zoom recordings, Slack practices).
- Make sure all team members have **agreed upon standards for sharing** project management systems and communicating/updating one another, along with understanding what tool to use when, how, and why.





Notes:

- *This blog* is based on [How HRM and Knowledge Sharing Technologies Foster Virtual Team Productivity for Globally Dispersed Workforces: A Systematic Review](#), Journal of Human Resource Management (2020).
- *The post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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