A 5-year retrospective:
What have we learned about teaching virtual work skills?

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Abstract:
Five years ago, the authors of this proposal met for the first time at OBTC Asheville, and from that meeting began a collaboration in both research on and teaching of virtual work skills. In light of the MOBTS 2018 theme of "Reflective Reinvention," we propose a session that brings back to MOBTC some of the virtual work skills teaching methods and tools that we have developed in the years since our first OBTC encounter. Using participant-centered demonstrations and discussions, we share four teaching activities, including two mini-cases and two simulation exercises, all designed to enhance effectiveness in working virtually.

Keywords: virtual work, training, remote work, virtual teams, distributed/ global teams, virtual interviews

Introduction.

Five years ago, the authors of this proposal met for the first time at OBTC Asheville. Both had a similar aim and teaching question – how best to teach virtual work skills to our students? After attending each other's sessions on this topic and multiple conversations at Jim's Place, we began a collaboration that has spanned both research on and teaching of virtual work skills. As we considered the MOBTS 2018 theme of "Reflective Reinvention: Harnessing our Heritage to Reshape Management Education," we recognized that we can do exactly that, by bringing back to the conference some of the key teaching methods and tools that we have developed in the years since our first OBTC meeting. In doing so, we hope to provide some answers to the questions that we first raised five years ago.

Studies suggest that individuals are rarely well prepared for virtual work settings and sometimes have a difficult time adjusting to virtual work; yet, other research tells us that a lack of virtual work skills can have significant professional and career implications. Recent surveys of business professionals show that 85% of respondents indicate that at least a quarter of their productivity depends upon virtual teamwork (Solomon, 2016) and 34% of business leaders believe that over half of their company's full-time workforce will be working virtually by 2020 (Vanderkam, 2014).

In this session, we introduce activities we have developed in our classrooms over the last five years to help students enhance their virtual work skills and increase their likelihood of success in a virtual work environment. We will review two mini-cases that help students think through the challenges of virtual work, demonstrate techniques to improve effectiveness in virtual interviews, show a simulation exercise in which students practice consulting in a virtual team, and introduce several key concepts that are critical for training students to work virtually. These exercises can be used with undergraduate or graduate students, for online or face-to-face classes, and with domestic as well as international students, although the format and debriefing may differ depending on the type of student and class structure. These materials can also be used in a variety of management classes including introductory or general management courses, human resources, and/or special topics on the nature of work today.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.

Research indicates that individuals are still relatively apprehensive about virtual work, and that a lack of virtual work skills can have significant professional and career implications. For example, telecommuting, also known as telework or remote work (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), creates concerns for individual workers as professional interpersonal bonds become more difficult to form (Golden, 2006; Raghuram &

Wiesenfeld, 2004). Virtual teams can experience diminished performance if there are not mechanisms in place for sharing knowledge (Cramton, 2001) and developing trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). What's more, as the rate of telecommuting rises, and communication technologies allow more work to be done remotely, even those left in the office suffer from some of the same social malaise once attributed to telecommuters (Rockmann & Pratt, 2015), and must also be able to work effectively in a virtual environment, even while in the office. As virtual work becomes a norm for a growing proportion of workers, a broader question arises: How are we developing individuals to succeed in a virtual work environment?

The research on virtual work stems from a number of theoretical backgrounds from literature in computer-mediated communications, telecommuting, and virtual teams. Three significant theories which we touch on in our teaching include social presence theory, media richness theory and construal-level theory.

Social presence refers to the degree to which a communication medium conveys the actual presence of a communication partner (Gunawardena, 1995; Kreijns et al., 2011; Walther, 1992). The perception of others as being present depends not only on the words that are exchanged between communication partners but also on various paraverbal and nonverbal cues. Social presence is significant in virtual work in that it influences the accessibility and mutual understanding that occurs in virtual interactions.

Similar to social presence theory, media richness theory assumes that media differ in the way in which they convey certain types of information, so that they provide cues that help to make information less ambiguous and to establish a common frame of reference between the communication partners (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lengel & Daft, 1989). Media richness is important to understand as individuals need to be able to determine the best choice of technology to utilize when working virtually.

Last, construal-level theory suggests that individuals vary in the way they perceive the world around them (Trope & Liberman, 2010). High-level construals are those that focus on abstract images and tend to group people into categories (e.g., seeing the forest) whereas low level construals highlight concrete images with lots of details and tend to think of people as unique individuals (e.g., focus on the trees). This is relevant for virtual work in that higher- or lower-level construals can affect the types of interactions individuals have with others when working virtually (Wilson, O'Leary, Metiu & Jett, 2008; Wilson, Crisp & Mortensen, 2013).

Importantly, we recognize virtual work as a *widespread condition of work*, rather than a context-specific special case such as virtual teams or telecommuting. In fact, much virtual work today originates among people working with each other in informal dyads, from different offices, to get things done, without many of the institutional leadership,

training and other supports provided to those engaging in formal virtual teams or telecommuting. Thus, training students the theories and concepts associated with virtual work as well as skills to succeed in working virtually is valuable for a broader range of individuals than typically recognized.

Learning Objectives.

Participants in this session will have the opportunity to:
1. Increase their understanding of key concepts that inform virtual work skills training, including social presence theory, media richness theory and construal-level theory.
2. Learn new methods for teaching virtual work skills to their students, thus enhancing student effectiveness in many modern work environments.
3. Share their own best practices in teaching virtual work skills with other session participants

The content from this session can be incorporated into a variety of teaching topics including lessons on managing people, work design, selection, training, employee relations, teams, and global management practices.

Exercise Overview.

We plan to provide information on two types of exercises, case studies and simulations, used to help prepare students for working virtually.

First, we will share two mini-case exercises designed to get students thinking about the differences in and skills required to work virtually. One mini-case focuses on virtual selection and practices used by a company to hire employees without meeting them face-to-face. This mini-case is typically used with undergraduate human resource classes (both introductory and selection courses). A second mini-case exercise uses a scenario (fictional, though based on a real situation) related to the management of virtual employees. Students complete this exercise in a virtual team setting, giving further experiential reinforcement to key concepts of virtual work. Both of these mini-case exercises are used with classes of up to 30-40 people and can take anywhere from 30 minutes to over an hour, depending on instructor preferences. Since they are short case studies, students are provided the material in class and given time to complete it, either face-to-face or online. We will provide copies of these activities and the discussion questions associated with them during the session.

Second, we will present two simulation exercises that we have developed related to virtual work skills. One simulation demonstrates the virtual interview process, by

requiring students to participate in both virtual and face-to-face interviews with actual HR professionals and subsequently debriefing them to discuss the difficulties in each and tips to make them more successful. The second simulation focuses on consulting in virtual teams, requiring students to organize and conduct virtual consultant team meetings with a fictitious client, a role played by the instructor. Materials related to both of these simulations will be distributed in the session.

Session Description and Plan.
The session could be run in either a 60 or 90-minute length, as follows:

Activity	Duration for 90-minute program	Duration for 60-minute program
Introductions and session overview	5	2
Brief introduction of 3 key theories for teaching virtual work skills (social presence, media richness, construal-level theory)	10	8
Breakout into groups to discuss 2 mini-cases (each case to be discussed by half of groups)	15	12
Debriefing of mini-cases	10	8
Introduction of virtual interview simulation	15	10
Demonstration of virtual team consulting simulation	15	10
Sharing of participant best practices	15	8
Key takeaways and wrap-up	5	2
TOTAL	**90**	**60**

We plan to incorporate live examples of the activities, discussions, and demonstrations to keep participants actively involved (excerpted in most cases, in order to stay within time limits). Hard copies of materials will be used in the session, and participants will be given the chance to receive materials electronically, by leaving a name and e-mail address with the session organizers.

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