

REACHING THROUGH THE SCREEN: TOWARDS A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PROFESSIONAL VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Very close to being something without actually being it, existing or occurring on computers or on the Internet.

~ <http://www.meriam-webster.com> ~

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

~ Alice via Lewis Carroll ~

It is projected that 1.3 billion people will be working remotely on virtual teams by next year, 2015. This number is expected to grow another 20% by 2016. Some pundits believe that it’s necessary for virtual teams to meet “in the flesh” in order to be effective. But surely, that will not be possible for everyone.

We know that developing friendships at work can add tremendous value to the emotional climate of an organization and hence its productivity as well as profitabilityⁱ. We believe these same bonds of professional friendship can transcend the limits of physicality as well.

We want to better understand how professionals working virtually who’ve never met physically (and who may never meet) might still develop deep abiding internet-based relationshipⁱⁱ based on mutual respect and trust. We are therefore seeking examples of virtual professional relationships that are deep and abiding but where there has not been any physical meeting of participants.

A recent Google search reveals nothing written at all expressly under the heading of “*the social psychology of professional virtual relationships*”. Social psychology is defined as that “*branch of psychology that deals with social interactions, including their origins and their effects on the individual*”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Of course the Internet is replete with relevant content on virtual relationships, personal and professional. Indeed, there is more information now than ever. We then researched the following topics:

- Professional virtual relationships
- Online relations between professionals who never meet
- Authentic professional virtual relationships

What we discovered under these various headings is copious advice about virtual dating as well as establishing authenticity in selling one's personal and/or product brand online. The following are typical examples:

"How to Create Real Relationships With Social Marketing -- Be an Actual Friend: The way you engage with people makes an impression no matter what tool you are using. Look at your own behaviors and ask yourself, "Would I want to be my friend?" Are you noticing and affirming the value of individuals and groups in your network? Are you genuinely interested and paying attention to the people behind the texts and words on a screen? Are you going out of your way to be of service to others in your network? That's the kind of friend I would want to have and to be."^{iv}

"Tips to Create Meaningful, Authentic Connections Online - Authenticity doesn't have to mean complete transparency, but it does mean acknowledging what you really think and feel. Very rarely does a person think and feel only things that align with a polished online persona."^v

Much of the literature suggests that to be truly effective, virtual team members must occasionally meet physically at some time. The following commentaries are typical:

"It's no big secret that virtual teams need to meet face-to-face...A study completed by Dube and Robey found that...there's something important about corporeality that allows us to relate to each other, which psychologists haven't yet figured out...Stanford researcher Pamela Hinds notes that for many companies regularly scheduling face-to-face visits is actually a key strategy to building their virtual teams"^{vi}.

"Our findings suggest that site visits promote situated knowing who -- knowledge about distant colleagues that is situated in context and intertwined with practice -- that deepen relational coordination between co-workers. During site visits, people observed and interacted with their distant colleagues in these colleagues' context, thus gaining a deeper understanding of their behavior within the social and physical context in which they were situated. As they interacted, they reconstituted collaborative practices which further enabled knowing who and promoted relational coordination even after returning home, as evidenced by more frequent communication, responsiveness, problem-solving communication, mutual respect, and disclosure of personal information among distant coworkers"^{vii}.

Lewis Carroll's 1871 classic "Through the Looking Glass" inspired the title for this white paper. In this sequel to 'Alice In Wonderland', our heroine "enters a fantastical world...climbing through a mirror into the world that she can see beyond"^{viii}.



Alice wonders how her looking-glass counterpart would look like
Illustration by Claudia Octavia Neronis

The virtual world of work is equally fantastical, hence our title “Reaching Through The Screen”. This virtual world transcends time, space, and physicality and connects us synchronously wherever we may be situated on the planet. Therefore the conventions of traditional co-located teamwork simply don’t translate well in the virtual workspace.

Frankly, this is why virtual team efficacy is so abysmal. In one global study, 27% of virtual teams were found to be not fully performing. Another study revealed that only 18% of seventy global business virtual teams were found to be highly successful. Essentially, most virtual teams are performing significantly below capacity. Unsurprisingly, 19 out of 20 “*executives say they have experienced difficulty in managing virtual teams.*” Yet 65% of virtual teams have never had any training at all.

Happily, we discern light on the horizon. This is the result of pioneering academic research and programs. We’ve been in dialogue with several PhD candidates including Frederic Buisson at HEC Switzerland, Suzanne Malek at AIU, and David Kauffman at Poznan University of Economics. Each in their own way highlights the need for a new social psychology of professional virtual relationships. Typical of this emerging zeitgeist is Jean-François Stich at Lancaster University Management School. He is examining “well-being and virtual interactions at work.”

“Evidence is badly needed: what’s it like to work mainly via electronic devices; what impact does it have on the wellbeing of individuals, and the work done? How do different personality types engage and respond differently to e-working?”^x

Universities themselves are also starting to feature new programs expressly for inculcating new needed virtual management skills, for example the new Master’s in Virtual Team Management and Communication at Brandeis University^x.

Perhaps the most telling observation about the future of professional virtual relationships comes from Karin Watson, Simon McIntyre, and Ian McArthur at the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales in Australia in their paper “*Trust and Relationship Building: Critical Skills for the Future of Design Education in Online Contexts*” –

“Could you trust someone you had never physically met to successfully collaborate with you on a design project? If strong human-to-human relationships are seen as the foundation for effective collaborative design practice online, educators will be helping emerging generations of designers maximize their creative potential in a globally competitive market where online collaborative, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary creative skill-sets are demanded as the ‘norm’.”^{xi}

CALL TO ACTION

We are seeking examples of virtual professional relationships that are deep and abiding but where there has not been any physical meeting of participants. We hope to share the results in a new eBook.

PLEASE SUBMIT YOUR STORY AT - <http://playprelude.com/submissions/>

PERSONAL INSPIRATION STORIES FOR THIS WHITE PAPER

In 2012, my Canadian company entered its principal product called Prelude, a serious game that fosters social and emotional skills for individuals and teams, in a competition sponsored by the Software Information Industry Association (SIIA). Prelude was selected, along with nine other company offerings, as one of that year’s most relevant and innovative new education tech products. One outcome was some welcome trade news articles about Prelude. The CTO of a US education technology enterprise read one of those articles and contacted me out of the blue. I was very taken the work of his company as well. This led to several email exchanges about our respective beliefs about the industry and the evolution of learning more generally. At one point I shared a tech challenge with an aspect of our game. This led to some crucial development work to address the challenge on his part simply as a gesture of good will and belief. There was no mention of money or expectation of some measure of equal exchange. A plan for reciprocity eventually was framed. However this was never the raison d’être for our growing collaboration. The development work he did on spec helped propel the product to another level. It’s been two years and two months since then. While we have never met in person, our collaboration has evolved and our relationship has deepened virtually. In the ensuing time, his firm with the backing of his financial partner went on to help me rebuild the entire game in terms of design and functionality. This entailed even more costs and even more trust.

Our level of rapport and trust is of the highest order I can imagine. Indeed, we have shared very private thoughts, experiences, hopes, and fears. Sometimes we use VOIP and sometimes video. Ours is an entirely virtual professional relationship. We talk about meeting some day but for now it is not really needed or in the cards. - Howard B. Esbin, PhD

I live in the Netherlands and work with a woman in California. We started writing a book together for a client several years ago. We started every conversation with a 5-minute video chat to just say, "Hey, how are you?" We then turned the video off and continued to talk via Skype and write together in a Google document. When that client work ended, we decided to continue working together because we enjoyed it so much. Our collaboration sessions have continued to the present day years after the client work ended. She has become one of my closest friends and I've never met her in person. - Lisette Sutherland

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Howard B. Esbin, PhD is the creator of Prelude Virtual 1.0, a trust game for virtual teams @ www.playprelude.com. Prelude is informed by Howard's doctoral research and management experience in international development, philanthropy, and the private sector. The International Labour Organization, Education Canada, and UNESCO have published his writing. Howard founded Heliotrope, a social enterprise, to market Prelude and disseminate related research.

Lisette Sutherland serves on the Board of Directors for Happy Melly and is the Director at CollaborationSuperpowers.com, a company that helps teams work together from anywhere. With over 10 years experience with web-based collaboration tools and online community management, her goal is to get the best people working together regardless of location.

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