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Factors Constituting Employee Trust in Virtual Teams in India

Globalization and technological advancement as envisaged in the fourth industrial revolution had initially introduced the concept of virtual teams. However, the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant restricted situation increased the adoption of virtual working in the organizations. Organizations which had never imagined the scope for shifting the operations to the virtual mode, had to suddenly shift from traditional office mode and move to virtual working situation. The increasing shift from physical offices to virtual operations led to an increase in the issues of trust as there was lack of in-person interactions. The purpose of the study therefore is to identify the factors which constitute employee trust while working in virtual teams in India. For this purpose, data was collected from 211 Indian working professionals and analysed using statistical tool. Findings of the study identified four factors which constitute employee trust in virtual teams.

Keywords: Virtual teams-Interpersonal trust-Trust in virtual teams-Indian scenario

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, having high focus on technology had initially brought in the concept of working in virtual team, which allowed employees to work without geographical limitations by collaborating with people from different regions, time zones and culture (Lukić & Vračar, 2018). The onset of Covid-19 pandemic speeded up the adoption of the concept of virtual teams at a pace that was much faster than expected. The pandemic disrupted the entire functioning of the organizations and the organizational ecosystem witnessed sea-changes during this period. Many organizations were shut through the phase while other organizations which never imagined of operating

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remotely, had to suddenly shift the entire business operations from the 'normal' to the 'virtual' or semi-virtual mode. For the Information Technology sector, it was not a big challenge as the said sector has been offering virtual working to its employees even otherwise, but for the other sectors it was a testing period. These organizations had to ensure viability and also warrant the ability to scale up the operations and return to the core business activity after the pandemic situation got some respite (Gillespie *et al.*, 2020). It took a lot of effort and time to set the routine to the new ways of working for some institutions. While the organizations provided training and support in small groups to facilitate the transformation, the transition was not easy.

Since it was the need of the hour, and there were no feasible alternatives available, organizations as well as the employees happily adapted to the situation fast. The team leaders and HR managers worked hard to cope with the new situation, policies and procedures in the virtual mode to enable the staff to come up to the same work quality, output and standards in the changed environment of the physical office. However, it was a taxing time for both the organizations as well as the employees and lots of hits and misses happened during this period as it was a question of survival. There was loss of revenue for most organizations as the business operations were fully or partially shut due to the nation-wide lockdown imposed in view of the pandemic, while other smaller organizations had to discontinue operations. Some also went into extinction! Hence, in order to cut the cost, organizations announced pay-cuts and also laid off a large number of employees either temporarily or permanently. The uncertainty and volatility resulted in employee insecurity and serious issues of trust, as employees were not sure if they would have their jobs the next day. The virtual work mode also restricted face-to-face communication, limited informal interactions and hence narrowed down the scope for establishing employee trust (Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). Although employee trust is one of the most vital components in any organization, it becomes particularly important during the uncertain and unprecedented times. This is because during such times, even the employees' habitual trust on employer gets jolted and tested due to unpredictability and ambiguity (Gillespie *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, ensuring constant confidence and trust of employees probably is an enormous task for the organizations in virtual or semi-virtual work mode during the pandemic.

Employee Trust

Trust is an important element and a positive expectation which forms the basis of human relationships. However, there is no single definition of trust, and, it has been described and defined differently by different researchers. Consensus has been achieved by

researchers that trust influences cooperation, coordination (Gillespie *et al.*, 2020), performance, effectiveness and efficiency within the teams and the organization (Tzafrir & Dolan, 2004). Researchers have also linked trust to various other factors such as organizational commitment (Cook & Wall, 1980) and effectiveness in problem solving (Zand, 1972).

Cook and Wall (1980) referred to trust as the “the extent to which one is willing to ascribe good intentions to and have confidence in the words and actions of other people. The willingness will in turn affect the way in which one behaves towards others.” Sheppard and Sherman (1998) argued that “trust is accepting the risks associated with the type and depth of the interdependence inherent in a given relationship.” Tzafrir and Dolan (2004) defined trust as “a willingness to increase one’s resource investment in another party, based on positive expectation, resulting from past positive mutual interactions.” Mishra (1996) built a model of trust for employees as well as management in which they defined trust as “one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (i) competent, (ii) open, (iii) concerned, and (iv) reliable”.

There is ample research available which suggests that developing and building employee trust is critical to organizational efficiency and hence it is a desirable cultural attribute (Tzafrir & Dolan, 2004). Employee trust is a key component for building successful and high-performance teams, long-term stability of the organization, as well as for the employees’ well-being (Cook & Wall, 1980), but as the ancient saying “Rome was not built in a day”, so too, ‘trust must be built’ patiently amongst the team members over a period of time through open and frequent communication, active listening, empathy and respect (Hakanen & Soudunsaari, 2012). Shared vision, a strong leadership, and clarity in roles and responsibilities of employees are other essential factors which support in building trust and high-performance teams (Hakanen & Soudunsaari, 2012).

Researchers have stated that trust is the outcome when certain conditions or elements are fulfilled by the individuals involved (Tzafrir & Dolan, 2004). Hence, various components and dimensions of trust have been identified in the past researches. These dimensions are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Trust

Authors	Dimensions
Kee & Knox, 1970	Competence, motives
Jennings, 1971	Loyalty, accessibility, availability, predictability

Gabarro, 1978 openness,	Integrity, motives, consistency of behaviour, discreteness, functional/specific competence, interpersonal competence, business sense, judgement
Cook & Wall, 1980	Faith in trustworthy intentions, confidence in ability
Johnson-George & Swap, 1982	Reliability
Rempel & Holmes, 1986	Predictability, dependability, faith
Butler, 1991	Availability, competence, consistency, discreteness, fairness, integrity, loyalty, openness, fulfilment of promise, receptivity
Mishra & Mishra, 1994	Openness, competence, caring, reliability
Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995	Ability, benevolence, integrity
Cummings & Bromiley, 1996	Keeping commitments, negotiating honestly, avoiding taking advantage excessively
Mishra, 1996	Competence, openness, concern, reliability
Clark & Payne, 1997	Integrity, competence, consistent behaviour, loyalty, openness, respect show
Doney & Cannon, 1997	Credibility, benevolence
Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Winograd, 2000	Competence, openness and honesty, concern for employees, reliability, identification

(Tzafirir & Dolan, 2004)

From Figure 1 it can be seen that although there is some similarity in the dimensions of trust identified in the past researches, there is also notable differences. Competence, openness, reliability, loyalty, consistency and integrity have been prominently identified as the important dimensions of trust by the researcher. However, some of the dimensions identified are unique, like business sense, judgement (Gabarro, 1978), faith in trustworthy intentions, confidence in abilities (Cook & Wall, 1980), keeping commitments, negotiating honestly, avoiding taking advantage excessively (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996).

Ample literature is available related to employee trust; however, there are limited studies focusing on employee trust in virtual teams. Since the world has moved to the virtual mode and lot of organizations have offered flexible work arrangement to the employees, it is pertinent for organizations to maintain the same level of trust in the virtual teams as well. Ramaswamy, Das and Singh (2021) established in their research that highly

motivated, dedicated and involved employees who are highly passionate about their work and team are the pillars of strength for an organization. Nurturing such employees for the good of organization needs a lot of effort and encouragement, more so in the virtual-work mode.

Employee Trust in Virtual Teams

Virtual teams are electronically connected, geographically dispersed and culturally diverse (Benetyte & Jatuliavičienė, 2014), and these have the advantages of cost reduction, innovation, initiative, new knowledge creation, skill adoption, greater collaboration and knowledge transfer (Lukić & Vračar, 2018). Hiring the employees from different geographical locations without physically relocating them helps in pooling in the right employees and offering the convenience of flexible working hours (Ramaswamy, Das & Singh, 2021). However, the trust factor in such teams is found to be usually low (Benetyte & Jatuliavičienė, 2014).

Shaik and Makhecha (2019) stressed the need for a longer time to build trust in global virtual teams than face-to-face situations due to the geographical dispersion, limited informal communications, diverse cultural background, language barrier, etc. Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2004) conducted three-year rigorous research to study the impact of trust development during virtual sessions. They employed exploratory content analysis to suggest strategies for trust development in the virtual environment. It was posited that trust can be established in a virtual environment; however, certain unique strategies need to be followed to ensure the same, which are applicable to all those concerned with building trust in a virtual set-up. It was established in the research that the “communication environment” plays a crucial role in forming trust as individuals perceive higher risks in virtual communication. Strategies to effectively reduce risk and enable trust in a virtual environment, as suggested by Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2004) are establishing an early and open communication with the team members, developing positive virtual atmosphere, and engaging meaningfully in the tasks. Similar outcomes of perceived risks in a virtual environment were supported by Hung, Dennis and Robert (2004). They identified an integrative model of trust formation in virtual teams by suggesting methods and strategies that facilitate trust. However, in the absence of sufficient literature on the challenges faced by virtual teams, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) in their study highlighted the collaboration challenges in virtual teams and the mitigation strategies as well. Moreover, there is also no consensus regarding which scales should be used to measure employee trust (Mishra, 1996) and which factors constitute employee trust (Tzafirir & Dolan, 2004), especially in the virtual teams.

Objectives

- To re-validate the existing scale of Interpersonal Trust at Work in the context of virtual teams in India.
- To identify the factors which constitute employee trust in virtual teams in India.

Research Method

Type of Research – The study is empirical in nature and quantitative methodology was adopted. The purpose of the study is to re-validate the existing scale of Interpersonal Trust at Work and identify the factors which constitute employee trust while working in virtual teams in India. Hence, based on the survey design, a deductive approach was adopted as it helps in measuring the concepts quantitatively and also in explaining the causal relationship.

Sample – This study is focused on Indian employees who are fully or partly working in virtual teams. The sample for the study was based on purposive and snowball sampling method. In purposive sampling method, the respondents are identified based on the researcher's judgment, and it focuses on individuals who possess the required information and would also agree to share the same (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Like the purposive sampling method, snowball sampling is also a non-probability sampling technique in which a research respondent refers another respondent who possesses similar traits/characteristics to respond to the research survey (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). The inclusion criteria for the respondents were: (i) working professionals, (ii) residing in India, and (iii) working with virtual teams.

Sampling Procedure – Data was collected online through a survey questionnaire which was developed on Google Forms. The link to Google Form was shared with 577 working professionals through WhatsApp, LinkedIn and emails. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured of the confidentiality condition of the responses. Completed responses were received from 211 individuals, resulting in the response rate of 36.57%.

Tool for Data Collection – The primary variable for the study was 'Trust'. The scale for measuring the variable was adapted from the already established standardized scale of Interpersonal Trust at Work, developed by Cook and Wall (1980). The Interpersonal Trust at Work scale was used as it has been well established and cited by 4,365 researchers. The original scale included 12-items which had two factors that measured 'Faith' and 'Confidence' of employees with respect to Peers as well as the Management. All the items

in the adapted scale were measured on the five-point likert scale, where 1 indicated *strongly disagree* and 5 indicated *strongly agree* responses.

Samples of adapted items in the scale are:

- a) "I can trust the people I work with virtually, to lend me a hand, if I needed it."
- b) "I feel quite confident that the firm will always try to treat me fairly even if I continue working virtually."
- c) "I can rely on my virtual team members not to make my job more difficult by careless work."
- d) "Our firm has a poor future in virtual work mode unless it can attract better managers."

Data Analysis

Tools for Data Analysis - Data was analyzed with the help of Cronbach's Alpha, KMO and Bartlett's test, and Factor analysis.

Analytical Strategy - Data analysis was conducted in two steps. In the first step, the internal homogeneity and scale reliability were tested. In the second step, the researchers conducted factor analysis to identify the factors of employee trust in virtual teams.

Scale reliability indicates the "stability of findings" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). The tests of internal homogeneity and reliability indicated the stability and adequacy of the scale. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. The acceptable level for Cronbach's Alpha is 0.70 (Ursachi, Horodnic & Zait, 2015; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Cronbach's Alpha value for the scale came out to be 0.863, indicating reliability and high internal consistency.

Adequacy of the sample size was tested using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test, whose value ranges between 0 to 1. The KMO value between 0.8 and 0.9 is considered great, and value above 0.9 is considered as superb (Field, 2009). The KMO value for the data was 0.894. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is considered as significant when p-value is less than 0.005. The Bartlett's Test showed $p=.000$, supporting the Factor Analysis. The values of KMO and Bartlett's test are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.894
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1128.181
	df	66
	Sig.	.000

Since the items of Interpersonal Trust at Work developed by Cook and Wall (1980) were adapted for the purpose of this study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with the principal components and Varimax rotation was carried out. According to Williams et al. (2010), the “factor analysis is an important tool that can be used in the development, refinement and evaluation of tests, scales, and measures”. The results of Rotated Component Matrix are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Rotated Component Matrix^a

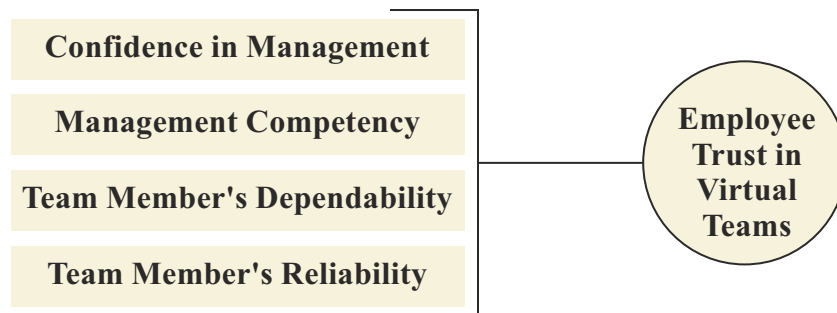
	<i>Components</i>			
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
Item 1	.717			
Item 2				.772
Item 3		.772		
Item 4	.832			
Item 5		.746		
Item 6	.769			
Item 7	.616			
Item 8		.691		
Item 9		.619		
Item 10			.851	
Item 11			.805	
Item 12				.849

*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.*

Based on the results of CFA, the items were grouped into four factors: (i) Confidence in Management, (ii) Management's Competency, (iii) Team Member's Dependability, and (iv) Team Member's Reliability (see Figure 2).

Items in all the four factors were examined and compared with the items in each factor of the original scale. Inductive approach was adopted to theoretically relate and define the factors (Williams *et al.*, 2010).

Figure 2. Factors Constituting Employee Trust in Virtual Teams



Confidence in Management: Confidence in the abilities of the management is the basic building block of trust between the organization and the employees. It is an important factor of trust which means trusting in the abilities and capabilities of other person/s (Cook & Wall, 1980). This essential factor assumes even more relevance during the current times of uncertainty and volatility wherein the employees are keenly conscious of the future survival of the organization in the constantly changing business environment. Four items were identified under this factor with each factor indicating between 0.616 and 0.832 ranges. Examples of item statements are:

1. 'Management can be trusted to make sensible decisions for the firm's future even in virtual work mode',
2. 'Management at work seems to do an efficient job even in virtual work mode'.

Management's Competency: Management competency assumes the capability of the organizational leadership to survive in the dynamic situation and competitive market. The management's competency as a factor of trust in virtual teams indicate employees' perception towards the organizational effectiveness (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Winograd, 2000). Two items were identified under this factor, both of which were negatively phrased. Factor loading of the items came out as 0.849 and 0.772. The item statements are:

1. 'Our management would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving the employees in virtual work arrangement', and
2. 'Our firm has a poor future in virtual work mode unless it can attract better managers'.

Team Member's Dependability: Dependability aspect of trust means that an individual is trustworthy and can be relied upon (Rempel & Holmes, 1986). The Team members' dependability as a factor of trust in virtual teams means being assured that the team members are responsive and will fulfill their responsibilities during the testing times (Su, 2019). Four items were identified under this factor with factors loading between 0.619 and 0.772 range. Examples of item statements are:

1. 'If I got into difficulties at work while working virtually, I know my team mates would try and help me out',
2. 'I can trust the people I work with virtually, to lend me a hand, if I needed it'.

Team Members' Reliability: Trust in terms of reliability is the expectation of consistent and systematic behavior (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Winograd, 2000; Mishra, 1996). Reliability is reinforced when the promises made by the individuals are fulfilled (Gabarro, 1978). Team member's reliability is an important factor in constituting trust in virtual teams as it helps in predicting the work-behavior and the work-outcome of the team members even when they are not being supervised in the virtual-work mode. Two items were identified under this factor with factor loading of 0.851 and 0.805. The item statements are:

1. "Most of my fellow team members would get on with their work even if they are not being supervised in virtual work mode", and
2. "I can rely on my virtual team members not to make my job difficult by careless work".

Results and Discussion

The original scale of Interpersonal Trust at Work, developed by Cook and Wall (1980), was specifically designed and applicable to the blue-collar British working population. However, the relevant scale with statistical support were difficult to locate specifically in the Indian context. The findings of this study have added to the existing body of knowledge by revalidating the existing scale and identifying the constituent factors of employee trust to fit the Indian context of employees working in virtual mode.

The need of the study was felt since most of the organizations operated through physical offices before the onset and quick spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic left organizations with no other option, but to operate virtually and remotely. Although, many organizations have returned to the earlier physical office systems, at the same time, many organizations (like TCS, Nestle, Tata Steel, GE India) have announced and offered flexible working models to their employees wherein the employees are free to work either from office or virtually. In such a scenario, it is still very important to understand, establish and continue the trust within the employees working virtually.

Trust is a key element for the success of every individual, and group, more so for virtual teams. It has been established that trust is also multi-dimensional. The findings of the study have contributed to the existing body of knowledge by identifying four factors which constitute employee trust in virtual teams, especially in the India context. The factors were identified from the point of view of trust in the management and trust in and among the team members. This aspect has been recognized as (i) Confidence in Management, (ii) Management's Competency, (iii) Team Member's Dependability, and (iv) Team Member's Reliability. The results have been supported by prior researches, although they were not specific to the Indian context and also not specifically for virtual teams.

Cook and Wall (1980) supported that confidence in the abilities of organization's management is one of the most important components of employee trust because it is the fundamental building block for the success of the organization. Knee and Knox (1970) identified that trust is the employees' perception of motives and competence. Similar findings have also been established by Mishra (1996) and Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis and Winograd (2000) wherein they postulated that, along with other factors, competency of management to grow and survive in the competitive market helps in developing the employee trust. In fact, Rempel and Holmes (1986), Mishra (1996) and Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis and Winograd (2000) postulated that trust among team members is established when an employee perceives the team members as dependable and reliable.

Establishment of a successful organization is based on human resources and human relationship; and trust forms the foundation of such relationships (Ghimire, 2019). The lack of trust between the employees and the management, as well as between employees will probably hamper and compromise the organization's decision-making effectiveness and growth, and team-members' prosperity as well. Therefore, the leaders, management, HR professionals and practitioners must pay attention to the employee relationships in the organization so that the element of trust is never suspect and negotiated. But rather effective and efficient teams are built and sustained by mutual trust.

Implications of the Study

Higher levels of risks and uncertainty are perceived by employees engaged in the virtual work mode, especially when such communication is newly adapted by organizations during disruptive and unprecedented times. Hence, organizations need to think out-of-the-box and develop a fresh mode in understanding of this emergent work environment and invent novel strategies to address issues in trust-building among employees. The findings of the study will therefore provide an anchor to organizations in these trying times and novel scenarios. Since the study validates the Interpersonal Trust Scale for the virtual teams in the Indian context, it is opening new opportunities for potential research avenues in the domain of trust-building in virtual teams in Indian organizations.

Building employee trust is a sound business practice which positively affects the performance and productivity of the employees. Moreover, the organizations are run and the businesses are conducted through human relationships; and trust is the foundation stone of such effective relationships (Tzafir & Dolan, 2004). The results of the study will therefore help organizations in understanding the factors that constitute employee trust in virtual work environment. The scale developed can be used by the leaders and HR practitioners to measure and assess the level of employee trust in their managers as well as team-members while working in virtual teams and will thereby support better team formation in the future.

Scope for Future Research

This study was conducted with a limited sample size of 211 respondents from India. Further studies can include a larger sample size with wider geographical diversity in order to ensure a more generalizable perspective. As more and more initiatives and concepts of working are emerging in the contemporary scenario, a more focused approach with respect to the type of organization, like the start-ups or matured firms, partnership, or public/private limited firms, which follow a fully or hybrid virtual model of working, can be studied to obtain comparable results with respect to how the employee trust differs, based on the types of organizations, and the individuals working therein. *Trust* is an important component which affects various other variables like performance and engagement. Researchers can further explore the impact of these variables of trust at work among employees and management of virtual teams in real time.

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