The Mediating Role of Identity Fit: Understanding the Relationship between Communication Media, Demographic Differences, and Creativity

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Abstract
Four recent trends (increased diversity, increased use of teams, increased use of a variety of communication media, and increased focus on creative output) have created a need for understanding how diversity and communication media influence individuals, their interactions within groups, and their influence on creativity. In previous work, the concept of identity fit was developed to explain how the psychological mechanisms inherent in group work and the situational effects defined by the team and organizational context interact to determine individual outcomes. The current study looks at the extent to which communication media and demographic diversity predict creativity. Identity fit is predicted to mediate the relationships between the antecedents and creativity.

Results of a field study show that communication media and demographic differences have a significant effect on creativity. Identity fit mediated the relationship between communication media and creativity. Implications of these results are discussed.

1. Introduction

The American workplace is becoming increasingly diversified as reported in numerous studies [18, 35]. At the same time, there has been an increase in the use of teams and groups in organizations in an attempt to facilitate effectiveness and empowerment [31, 53], and to realize the potential benefits of diversity [33]. Various forms of communication media are increasingly being used in the workplace to facilitate team and project work [50]. Finally, creativity is becoming increasingly important to organizations as they attempt to not only earn short-term profits but develop new and interesting products and services that enable them to survive over the long term [36, 48]. These four trends suggest that not only is there an increase in diverse people in the workplace, but there are more situations in which they must interact, more ways to interact, and more dimensions on which they are evaluated.

2. Background

2.1 Communication media

A number of studies report that there are a myriad of ways that electronic interaction influences both the group processes and the individuals within the groups [27, 45]. Weisband & Atwater (1999) found that individuals in electronic groups inflated their self-ratings but rated other group members more accurately than did individuals in face-to-face groups. Warekentin, Sayeed & Hightower (1997) report that virtual electronic teams have low levels of satisfaction and team cohesion. It is claimed that face-to-face communication provides richer information than non-face-to-face communication because face-to-face interaction provides social context cues and social information about the members of the group [12, 39]. There has been debate in the literature as to the benefits of richer media. Some researchers [12, 14]