

Virtual Workplace Culture and White Identity

Literature Review by Nikki Nagler, NYC Leadership Academy

A large and growing body of research has examined the dynamics of workplace culture and its existence within a larger societal context. With virtual and remote work becoming increasingly popular in the United States, it is important to understand how these work environments fit within a larger societal framework. Just as the values and norms associated with white identity have shaped American society, workplace cultures express these same norms of whiteness. This literature review seeks to explore how virtual and remote work environments may perpetuate a culture centered on white identity.

In particular, this literature aims to answer the following:

- [*What is workplace culture?*](#)
 - [*What is virtual work and how has the sector grown?*](#)
 - [*How are societal and workplace cultures defined by white identity and values?*](#)
 - [*What role does workplace culture play in employee identity, behavior, appearance, motivation, and feeling of belonging?*](#)
 - [*How might virtual work environments be defined by white identity and values?*](#)
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What is workplace culture?

- Culture involves the shared values, assumptions, and practices that guide human behavior. It influences the way people think, their motivations, and how they categorize things (Olson & Olson, 2003).
- Workplace culture describes the environment in which people work and the influence it has on how they think, act, and experience work (Warrick, 2017).
- Workplace culture can be viewed on two levels (Warrick, 2017):
- A visible level observed by artifacts such as dress, office layout and design, and the emphasis on technology, as well as the style of leadership style, how people are treated, and how decisions are made and get implemented.
- An invisible level characterized by expressed values, underlying assumptions, and deep beliefs.
- Workers employed in professional environments quickly learn that there are informal guidelines and rules that they are expected to follow in the workplace (Trefry, 2006; Wingfield, 2010).
- Organizations are influenced by external norms and accepted standards by the prevailing societal culture, and both directly shape the behavior of individuals at work (Enz, 1986).
- Workplace environments often reflect and protect the cultural assumptions of the dominant group, so that the practices of that group are seen as the norm to which all others should conform (Walter et al., 2017).

What is virtual work and how has the sector grown?

- Virtual or remote organizations are those that consist of individuals working toward a common goal, but without centralized buildings, physical shared space, or other characteristics of a traditional organization (Staples, Hulland, & Higgins, 1998).
- There are different forms of “virtual work” depending on the number of persons involved and the degree of interaction between them (Ebrahim, Ahmed, & Taha, 2009).
 - *Telework* (telecommuting): work done partially or completely outside of the main company workplace with the aid of information and telecommunication service
 - *Virtual groups*: when several teleworkers are combined and each member reports to the same manager
 - *Virtual teams*: members of a virtual group within an organizational structure who interact with each other in order to accomplish common goals
 - *Virtual communities*: larger entities of distributed work in which members participate via the internet, guided by common purposes, roles and norms
- Advances in communication technologies, a shortage of talent and new generational expectations have all led to a shift towards more virtual work (Flood, 2018).
- More than two-thirds of people (70%) around the world work remotely at least once every week, while 53 percent work remotely for at least half of the week (International Workplace Group, 2018).
- More than 26 million Americans—about 16% of the total workforce—now work remotely at least part of the time, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Between 2005 and 2015, the number of U.S. employees who telecommuted increased by 115%. During that same period, the non-telecommuter population grew by less than 12%.

What are the benefits of virtual work?

- Virtual or remote work environments offer workers more flexibility, autonomy, and control over their work lives (Harrington & Santiago, 2006).
- With fewer colleague distractions, virtual workers may be more focused on tasks and more productive (Hortensia, 2008).
- Virtual workers reduce or eliminate the time and costs associated with transportation (Hortensia, 2008).
- For organizations, virtual work reduces the expenses associated with a physical workspace (rent, maintenance, insurances, utilities, etc.) and provides an increased talent pool (Hortensia, 2008).

What are the challenges of virtual work?

- Communication with peers in virtual organizations can be limited since much office communication tends to be informal (Harrington & Santiago, 2006).
- Without visual cues, body language, and face-to-face communications developed with day-to-day contact, there can be less team cohesion, trust, camaraderie, and satisfaction with the team (Flood, 2018).
- It is more difficult to build a sense of shared identity in a virtual environment because team members are less visibly connected to the organization. Without a sense of belonging, it is difficult for remote workers to understand the role they play and build a shared sense of purpose (Flood, 2018; Spreitzer, 2004).
- A lack of peer and social interaction can leave virtual workers feeling isolated, leading to lowered motivation and personal satisfaction levels, impacting work performances (Koehne, Shih, & Olson, 2012).

How are societal and workplace cultures defined by white identity and values?

- Even though many overtly racist laws have changed, the vast majority of American institutions have been guided by white, western ways of thinking, behaving and knowing (Walter et al., 2017).
- American culture has explicitly and implicitly privileged whiteness and produces it as the standard by which “normal” people, ideas, and practices are often measured (Okun, 2016; Ward, 2008).
- Because we all live in this culture of whiteness, its characteristics, attitudes and behaviors can show up in any group or organization, whether it is white-led or predominantly white or people of color-led or predominantly people of color (Okun, 2016).
- Just as in the larger societal culture, workplace culture is structured around white, heterosexual and middle-class values and norms. The privileges that these values hold are rarely acknowledged or recognized (Wildman, 1995; Wingfield, 2010).
- At an organizational level, whiteness defines what is “professional” or “effective” (Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk, 2014).

What role does workplace culture play in employee identity, behavior, appearance, motivation, and feeling of belonging?

- Workplace culture can significantly influence employee performance, engagement, morale, motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Warrick, 2017).
- The workplace is the physical space in which most people spend the majority of their waking hours. Therefore, workers think of the workplace as a primary space for the realization and projection of their authentic selves (Ainsworth, 2014).
- One overarching value in contemporary workplace culture is an emphasis on cohesion and homogeneity. Identity difference can be viewed as a threatening source of potential discord and inefficiency (Ainsworth, 2014).
- Employees can conform to the workplace culture (thus engaging in a performance identity), and risk a sense of insecurity, frustration, and betrayal of their authentic selves, or they can assert their authentic identities and risk the pitfalls of stereotyping and negative career consequences (Rosette & Dumas, 2007)

How might virtual work environments be defined by white identity and values?

- According to Okun (2016), organizations are defined by a “white supremacy culture,” that reveals itself across 13 characteristics, including perfectionism that leaves little room for mistakes, the belief that traditional standards and values are objective and unbiased, and the emphasis on a sense of urgency.
- Virtual work environments may replicate these characteristics in the following ways:
 - *Perfectionism* – Virtual workers tend to know less about their distant colleagues, making it more difficult to develop relationships and to correctly perceive and infer communications. With little information about colleagues, deviance from the “norm” is likely to be more salient, and attributions to personal characteristics such as incompetence or laziness more likely (Moser & Axtell, 2013).

- *Sense of Urgency* – Without physical proximity, managers are not able to manage by "walking around" and viewing employees, possibly leaving managers feeling a loss of control. This feeling can result in excessive efforts to contact the employee and monitor their production (Raghuram, Garud, Wiesenfeld, & Gupta, 2001).
- *Worship of the Written Word* - Virtual workers report that to keep up with the continuous communication of the work day, they must be more explicit in emails, explaining everything in more detail to prevent questions in order to reduce turnaround time (Koehne, Shih, & Olson, 2012). However, tone of voice, facial expressions and behavior are important parts of communication in different cultures (Staples, & Zhao, 2006).
- *Individualism* – In cultures where individualism is valued, people seek individual gain and personal recognition. Those from more collectivist societies tend to value cooperation, teamwork and personal relationships over individual gain and competition (Staples, & Zhao, 2006).
- *Paternalism* - Virtual teams have less externally supplied structure and constrained interaction because of physical distance and time lags in communication. Without formal structure and delayed communication, employees may avoid contacting superiors with questions, concerns, or suggestions, leaving decisions and practices unchallenged (Workman, 2005).
- *Quantity over quality / Progress is Bigger, More* – In virtual workspaces, the boundaries that separate work and nonwork domains are not as clearly defined, making it difficult for workers to establish clear boundaries to segment their activities. This may be exacerbated within a culture that emphasizes consistent output (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004).
- *Fear of Open Conflict* - Virtual employees' remoteness and reliance on lean communication media (such as e-mail) increases the likelihood of misunderstandings and distrust. Distrust can lead to feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety. With these feelings, a perceived lack of visibility, and the inability to clearly demonstrate their capabilities, can negatively impact perceived job security and career progress, possibly holding these workers back from expressing any conflict or discomfort (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004).
- *Power Hoarding* – A perceived lack of visibility can lead virtual workers to fear being "out of sight, out of mind" will limit opportunities for promotion. Concern for their job security and career progress, may incentivize these workers to hoard power or feel threatened when others suggest support or changes (Dahlstrom, 2013; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004).

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