

ABC West



MOVING THE NEEDLE

What Happens to Global Virtual Teams When a Pandemic Hits? Maintaining Normalcy and Stability with Disruption All Around

Peter Cardon, Jolanta Aritz, Carolin Fleischmann, Terri Elhaddaoui, Kristen Getchell, Rose Helens-Hart, Kirsti Iivonen, Frank Insignares, Xiaoli Li, Minna Logemann, Juan Carlos Palmer-Silveira, Miguel Ruiz-Garrido, Archana Shrivastava, Scott Springer, James Stapp, Stephanie Swartz, Naomi Warren, Karen Woolstenhulme, and Eigirdas Zemaitis

Each year, the Virtual Business Professional (VBP) program brings together professors and students from across the globe to engage in client projects. The VBP program of 2020 occurred from the beginning of March through the middle of April. In this article, we share how the COVID-19 pandemic affected VBP participants and their teams. We present post-project survey results (completed by 440 of 530 participants for an 83 percent response rate), professor comments, and student comments to demonstrate how VBP participants overcame many of the pandemic disruptions to work effectively in virtual teams, develop compassion and empathy for one another, and foster more global mindsets.

About the VBP Program

Since 2013, the Virtual Business Professional (VBP) program has helped university students develop virtual team, online collaboration, and cross-cultural communication skills. The program places students in virtual teams of five or six members from five or six different institutions located in two to four different countries. The teams are tasked with managing a client project over roughly six weeks. This is a difficult, challenging, yet rewarding project.

Because no team members are co-located, they must rely entirely on online tools to communicate and collaborate. We have found that students perform much better when they use required software platforms. They must meet at least weekly using an online video platform (this year they used Skype; in past years, they used Zoom). They use Slack as their collaboration and team messaging space. We also ask students to experiment with emerging technologies. For example, in 2019, VBP participants used an AI-assisted tool as part of their online video conferences to evaluate their team dynamics based on conversational patterns (including interruptions), eye contact and other nonverbal communication, and tone of voice and word choices. This year, students experimented with meeting transcription software (Otter.ai) and captions (a feature in Skype). Generally, the goal is for VBP participants to use mainstream and emerging tools in the project.

For the client projects, VBP teams most often address issues related to corporate communications. VBP teams typically evaluate the degree to which a company's online communications (including its website and social media presence) align with its desired reputation. Then, VBP teams develop recommendations to improve a company's online communications. The final product is a report, which is collaboratively evaluated and graded by participating professors. The top reports are sent to the client companies, and then the client companies select the top three as winners. Over the course of the VBP project, there are weekly deliverables to keep the teams on track to complete solid research and develop a professional and insightful report.

Upon completion of the program, students receive the VBP certification that can be posted on LinkedIn and other sites. Past participants often report how they discuss their VBP achievements in job interviews and apply what they learned in their new roles. The VBP program is one among many global business communication projects intended to build global virtual team and global learning skills (Aritz et al., 2018; Brewer, 2016; Fleischmann, Aritz, & Cardon, 2020; Fleischmann, Cardon, & Aritz, 2020; MacLeod et al., 2016; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008; Walker et al., 2018).

This year's VBP project involved approximately 530 students at 14 institutions that are located in 7 countries (Finland, France, Germany, India, Lithuania, Spain, United States). The geographic diversity of the institutions, however, does not capture the full global diversity of the participants: VBP participants hailed from over 40 countries. Altogether, 19 professors participated in the project.

Students worked on client projects for Google, Starbucks, and Audi. The projects for Google and Starbucks focused on online reputation management and the project for Audi involved a market entry challenge. Bernhard Gabler, Sales Manager Audi Genuine Accessories, talked about the student reports he viewed: "Participating in VBP 2020 was an inspiring experience. The teams that worked on a market entry strategy for AUDI's UTR looked at the project from many different perspectives and generated many new insights for us. Their results are very helpful and are being used for the development of our market entry strategies. I'd be happy to bring another project to VBP in the future." (The original comments were in German and were translated by Professor Carolin Fleischmann). The sponsor at Starbucks commented, "Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this project along with your class. It is really special for me to step away and read an analysis from a new perspective."

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Students

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted business and education throughout the world. As the pandemic became increasingly disruptive across the globe in March and April, the VBP program was in full swing. Four of the VBP host countries—the United States, Spain, France, and Germany—now represent four of the five hardest hit countries in terms of total confirmed COVID-19 cases. Further, one of the partner schools (Baruch College) is located in New York City, the city with the most confirmed cases.

Our survey showed that the pandemic was indeed disruptive in many ways. About 43 percent of VBP participants said they generally experienced significant anxiety and nervousness during this time; 40 percent said a change in job or work responsibilities significantly impacted their schoolwork; 38 percent said being forced to abruptly move out of their dorm or apartment impacted their schoolwork; 35 percent said a change in their family situation significantly impacted their schoolwork; and 32 percent said that moving classes online impacted their ability to participate in their schoolwork.

The survey, however, didn't capture the severity and even tragic impacts on many VBP participants. A student Baruch College (CUNY) explained, "With the death of [a] few close family members which has severely impacted me, I was able to realize the importance of good health and a healthy family,

which we often take for granted. The occurrence of this pandemic has shown me the good and the bad in the world." A student from Brigham Young University-Hawaii (BYU-H) mentioned, "The roommate of one of my teammates had COVID, so he was in the hospital, too, for testing, and he could not attend some of the meetings." A student at Kennesaw State University (KSU) said, "Having family members come back positive with the virus only made it harder to concentrate on schoolwork and to be able to fully focus."

Many students reported being laid off or experiencing financial struggles. For example, a student from Oklahoma State University (OSU) shared, "I first had to figure out what to do with school and my apartment, since I got laid off because of the pandemic. I need money to survive, so that became my number 1 priority." Others gained additional family responsibilities. For example, a student from the University of Southern California (USC) mentioned, "A couple teammates had to move out of their respective countries to return home. One teammate had to move into her grandmother's house to take care of her. Another member was in NY, where her mother worked in a nursing home."

Professors in the project reported many types of challenges students faced. For example, Professor Xiaoli Li at the University of Dayton (UD) explained, "There are non-traditional students in some groups. For example, one full-time flight attendant with an ever-challenging schedule in the seven weeks; one student with three younger children and during the COVID-19 situation they are all at home with her; another student who has a part-time job in a pharmacy and her working schedule changed (more hours demanded) and she barely had free time to do any work."

A Commitment to Structure and Normalcy in an Uncertain Time

About two weeks into the project, many students started telling their professors how challenging the project coordination was due to COVID-19 complications. Our entire team of professors considered a variety of options, including reducing the requirements for the project and making grading concessions (many schools were reverting to pass/no pass grades). Collectively, we chose to extend deadlines one week but maintain the structure and rigor of the project. This commitment provided a sense of normalcy for many students and ultimately led to high-quality work by the students.

Professor Minna Logemann at Baruch College in New York City explained, "Many [students] felt that the virtual team communication and the global VBP project in fact helped them in the disruption by offering continuity and some stability – or almost comfort since all team members around the world were experiencing the same chaos." This sentiment was echoed by one of her students, "The VBP project helped me feel a bit more grounded because one part of my academic life was fairly untouched."

Students often mentioned how the stability and the smart tools they learned to use helped them appreciate the project. A USC student commented, "The VBP project was a truly valuable experience. Most of my team had to move home during the project for health and safety reasons, making meetings via Skype slightly more difficult. However, the tools that we were encouraged to use, including using Otter.ai to provide a transcript of our meetings as well as Slack, Google Drive and other online communication platforms, helped us reach our goals in the end. I am grateful for the opportunity and challenge of working in a virtual, global team during my college career."

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Team Dynamics

When asked what impacts the pandemic had on their team dynamics, 56 percent said it had a negative impact, 33 percent said it had no impact, and 11 percent said it had a positive impact. Clearly students perceived this stressful period as a negative influence on teamwork. Yet, when students reported their general sense of satisfaction and inclusion in their teams, they were extremely positive. Roughly 90 percent said they were included in group decisions and 83 percent said they were valued for their contributions. About 80 percent said they were satisfied with team decisions

and 71 percent were satisfied with their teams' performance. This project runs on an annual basis, and these satisfaction and inclusion ratings are similar to other years. Thus, even with all the challenges, the large majority of students rated their teamwork highly.

Frequently, students explained the challenges of working in this new environment. One OSU student mentioned, "With the transition to online classes, I felt as if less work got accomplished and there was an even more lack of understanding of what needed to be accomplished among my teammates for the project." Another OSU student explained that these challenges often became technical in nature: "When COVID-19 happened a lot of my team had to go back home, and home may have not had the best WiFi. So most of our calls we would have at least one person missing the call because their WiFi was crashed."

Many of the disruptions led to non-participation, which was a significant stressor for students. A CUNY student near the mid-point of the project explained, "In my VBP team, I feel that the world-wide pandemic made some people unresponsive which is no fun. I've been trying to start communications about meetings and due dates but some people aren't replying and we are spread all around the world. It's just really unfortunate and I hope that it will not affect my overall grade in this class as much."

Despite the challenges presented by mid-semester academic and personal disturbances, many students pointed out that their teams were able to recover from the disruptions. A student at BIMTECH explained, "[The] pandemic happened all of a sudden. We were not prepared for it. I thought now the project may get disrupted. But after some time, all team members were working together to complete it. That was amazing." A USC student described the initial disruptions, "[The] coronavirus negatively impacted our group because we went from being on three time zones to being on four, which made scheduling group meetings even more difficult. When stay at home orders and travel bans were introduced, we lost a week due to travel and moving out of school. However, once everyone was back home and settled, we proceeded business as usual and got into a nice flow. I am proud of the efforts every member made not to allow this unforeseen issue to affect our project significantly." Professor Eigirdas Zemaitis from Vilnius University Business School (VU) said, "At the start students thought that it will be extremely difficult, but later they recognized that virtual cooperation is real thing and the virus cannot destroy this channel."

Developing Compassion and Empathy

One of the more rewarding parts of this year's program was to see how often students demonstrated understanding and concern to their teammates. As Professor Rose Helens-Hart of Fort Hays State University (FHSU) commented, "My students expressed more understanding toward others and self-compassion when it came to dealing with COVID-19 challenges than they had in project update conversations." Similarly, Professor Xiaoli Li at UD explained, "Compassion, empathy, being considerate of others' situation, etc, are what I have heard from my students. I think these are what students learned this time more so than the last time in VBP." Professor Frank Insignares of ONIRIS commented that some teams "were all highly pleased with the empathy and trust developed with the team and were made to feel really comfortable as NON-native speakers."

Students consistently talked about their experiences contributed to a desire to help others. A BYU-H student from Tonga explained this feeling, "Sometimes you just pick up the pieces and help others who can't fulfill their responsibilities. In my group, we forgot that not everyone is the same, and especially at this pandemic time, not everyone is on their right state of mind. We learned it's best to lend out a helping hand." Another student from BYU-Hawaii put it this way: "COVID has really been so inconvenient with this project. It really is a good metaphor for life. Compassion and understanding can go a long way, probably especially in the business world. Specific communication takes a whole new meaning when working with different time zones and people we've never met."

Many students focused on awareness, emotions, and feelings when they talked about the project. As a student from Universitat Jaume I (UJI) emphasized, "Understanding other people's ideas and emotions [was important]." Another student from UJI said "In my humble opinion, people will learn to respect more others' situation as well as to understand better themselves thanks to the isolation period." Students from KSU said, "The team often talked about our personal lives and we got to know each other better because of the virus. We occasionally did welfare checks on each other as well."

A student from USC highlighted how this unique time helped them understand one another: "I can clearly see the importance of the VBP project in our current battle against the coronavirus. We made sure that everyone was comfortable with the times we met, as well as the tasks and deadlines we agreed to. Our team's response could not have been greater, seeing how it reflected maturity, empathy, and responsibility."

Working with Members of Other Cultures

A major goal of the project is to build relationships across the globe and learn to work effectively together. A VU student said, "It was fun. I had an opportunity to talk with other students from different universities and countries, and I liked it. You can learn how other students from elsewhere works on projects, what are their methods and approach to it." Another VU student explained, "I liked it. The group I was in had very nice people. The main lesson I learned from this is how to work with people living in regions that have 8 to 10 hours difference in time zones." According to a USC student, "Automated transcripts were incredibly helpful when time zones differences didn't allow certain team members to join a meeting. In general, I had no idea how well automated captions and transcripts work and what a huge impact they can make for non-native speakers."

For many students, this is the first chance to work with people in other countries, and the prospect often seems daunting. A KSU student said, "At first, I was not looking forward to the project. I thought it was going to be a headache to have to work with people from around the world. There are different time zones, different cultures, different styles of learning/writing, but those are the things that made the project fun and exciting. It was an amazing experience to work with students from not only New York and California, but also India and Germany." Another KSU student said, "I felt the accomplishment of working with people from all over the world. I have never done anything like this before. This was a fantastic opportunity. It was also unique going through a pandemic all together. We were all in similar situations." A BIMTECH student mentioned, "Projects like VBP help to know people from different cultures and adapt to their personality. One benefit of this project is that you learn to adjust with people of different nature, habits and the way of thinking VBP helped a lot to gain such skills."

A UD student shared the following: "Over the past few weeks we have embarked on a multicultural journey that included four different time zones, two different first languages, and five different universities in just my group. I had the pleasure of working with a girl that lives and attends college in Lithuania. It was interesting to hear her perspectives on American firms we all know so well such as Google and Starbucks. There were minor language barriers when it came to writing the report, but as all good groups do, we figured it out."

As a CUNY student said, "My VBP teammates are scattered around the world so every time we get together via Zoom we talk about what's happening in the country/state we're in and update each other on current events and our living situation. In a way, it's almost like having pen pals and that to me is so exciting." One Babson student commented on the atmosphere that made bonding easier: "One of the things that I believe helped our team in the transition was keeping up in our 'casual channel' on Slack. We posted icebreakers at the beginning of the semester, but as we all moved online and left campus, we tried to keep it entertaining and light with funny videos to keep spirits up. One

of the very cool places we bonded was when one of our group members returned from attending a traditional Indian festival. We were able to bond and connect personally as we built cultural awareness and understanding. We did a good job of staying on task during meetings but before and after we made time to talk about these things.”

Many students at our institutions had study abroad opportunities cancelled. Others want to study abroad but lack the resources. The opportunity to interact globally through virtual team projects has been an important intercultural experiential experience for students who are unable to go abroad for diverse reasons. Now that many students will be unable to go on their semester abroad this year, the VBP project has offered a valuable Internationalization-at-Home experience.

Sadly, some VBP participants did not feel included. One BIMTECH student said, “I didn’t find it very fruitful due to the attitude of my teammates. They were arrogant and always tried to exclude me.” A few of the Oniris team members “reported low trust and empathy and some felt ‘ignored’ because of non-native issues but work got done on time despite these issues.”

Views about the Future of Globalization and Virtual Communication

Working with team members from across the globe, students in the project were in a unique position to offer perspectives about the long-term impacts of COVID-19. They were asked a series of questions on the post-project survey about what they viewed as the long-term impacts on business travel, globalization, and even online education. About 89 percent believed that business professionals will rely more heavily on virtual communication in the future; about 65 percent believed that people are more likely to adopt a global mindset; about 52 percent believed business professionals will travel less in the future; about 50 percent believed the world will become even more economically integrated; about 42 percent believed students will want more online education in the future. In many ways, these align with recent polls that suggest most professionals view the COVID-19 pandemic as transformative and as creating a “new normal” (Harter, 2020; The Glass Door Team, 2020). Overall, we found several of these views quite encouraging. As professors who value intercultural learning, we are heavily invested in supporting high levels of global integration and cooperation. We are quite concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to an increase in isolationist and exclusionary political and corporate policies. However, our students hold a much more positive view of the future, and it is gratifying to see this project draw out these global views.

VBP participants frequently echoed the findings from the post-project survey. One student from UJI said, “I think that, after this situation, our life and the way we work and communicate will change to a more digital way.” An OSU student remarked, “I just received a job offer, and as my employers and I discussed, due to the pandemic we are going to have to see where things go. This assignment has allowed me to become more confident in doing so. The world is shifting to a virtual basis...and I am immensely ready to take on the new changes because of VBP.” A BYU-H student followed, “This project came at the perfect time. Working from home and doing school from home definitely helped me transition to this online business environment.”

Concluding Comments

In the COVID-19 era, we live in a rare moment when people across the world are sharing quite common experiences. For many faculty in the program, this semester has served as proof that experiential communication and collaborations programs like the VBP are essential. At a time when many higher education institutions have understandably lightened the load for students, we chose to maintain the structure and rigor of this program so that students could build the virtual communication skills and global mindsets they will need in a post-COVID19 world.

References

Aritz, J., Walker, R., & Cardon, P. W. (2018). Media Use in virtual teams of varying levels of coordination. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 81(2), 222-243.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490617723114> (<https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490617723114>)

Brewer, P. E. (2016). Teaching and training with a flexible module for global virtual teams. In K. St. Amant & M. Flammia (Eds.), *Teaching and training for global engineering: Perspectives on culture and professional communication practices* (pp. 173-197). John Wiley and Sons.

Fleischmann, C., Aritz, J., & Cardon, P. W. (2020). Language proficiency and media richness in global virtual teams: Impacts on satisfaction, inclusion and task accomplishment. *ACM Transactions on Social Computing*, 2(4), 17:1-17:18. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3363564> (<https://doi.org/10.1145/3363564>)

Fleischmann, C., Cardon, P. W., & Aritz, J. (2020). Smart collaboration in global virtual teams: The influence of culture on technology acceptance and communication effectiveness. *Proceedings of the 53rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 363-372.

<https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2020.045> (<https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2020.045>)

Harter, J. (2020, May 1). How coronavirus will change the 'next normal' workplace. *Gallup*.

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/309620/coronavirus-change-next-normal-workplace.aspx>
(<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/309620/coronavirus-change-next-normal-workplace.aspx>)

MacLeod, J., Yang, H. H., & Xu, J. (2016, July). Collaborative Online International Learning: A Case Study between USA and Thailand. In Educational Technology (ISET), 2016 International Symposium on (pp. 106-110). *IEEE*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ISET.2016.28> (<https://doi.org/10.1109/ISET.2016.28>)

Starke-Meyerring, D., & Wilson, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Designing globally networked learning environments*. Sense Publishers.

The Glassdoor Team. (2020, March 23). New survey: COVID-19 & employee sentiment on changing workforce. *Glassdoor*. <https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/new-survey-covid-19/>
(<https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/new-survey-covid-19/>)

Walker, R., Cardon, P. W., & Aritz, J. (2018). Enhancing global virtual small group communication skills. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 47(5), 421-433.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2018.1475292> (<https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2018.1475292>)

Note. All data used was provided with consent from students.

Contributing Authors

- Peter Cardon, University of Southern California
- Jolanta Aritz, University of Southern California
- Carolin Fleischmann, University of Southern California
- Terri Elhaddaoui, Kennesaw State University
- Kristen Getchell, Babson College
- Rose Helens-Hart, Fort Hays State University
- Kirsti Iivonen, Aalto University
- Frank Insignares, Oniris
- Xiaoli Li, University of Dayton
- Minna Logemann, Baruch College — CUNY
- Juan Carlos Palmer-Silveira, Universitat Jaume I
- Miguel Ruiz-Garrido, Universitat Jaume I
- Archana Shrivastava, BIMTECH
- Scott Springer, Brigham Young University–Hawaii

- James Stapp, Oklahoma State University
- Stephanie Swartz, Mainz University of Applied Sciences
- Naomi Warren, University of Southern California
- Karen Woolstenhulme, Utah State University
- Eigirdas Zemaitis, Vilnius University Business School (VU)

Recommended Citation: Cardon, Peter, et al. (2020). What Happens to Global Virtual Teams When a Pandemic Hits?: Maintaining Normalcy and Stability with Disruption All Around. *the Western ABC Bulletin*, 2.1.

JUNE 14, 2020JUNE 15, 2020



Website Powered by WordPress.com.