Global teams are often formed in multinational corporations as a strategic human resource solution for bringing together people with specific knowledge, skills and expertise, regardless of their geographical location. Interaction among such diverse individuals is enabled through use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as e-mail, audio- and videoconferencing, knowledge management systems and archival databases. Global teams offer the promise of better and more innovative solutions and products through tapping into human resource pools worldwide, more efficient around-the-clock work across time zones, and lower-cost access to local markets and customers without the need for travel (Carmel, 1999; Gluesing & Gibson, 2004). However, in order to achieve these benefits, global teams must contend with a number of challenges due to the high level of complexity they face in working across multiple contexts: geographical, temporal, cultural and technological. This chapter addresses structural dynamics of global teams, reviewing key challenges and effective team-building strategies for managing such dynamics.

Challenges due to decoupling in global teams
Global teams are defined here as work teams that are virtual, culturally diverse, structurally dynamic, and whose members collaborate on a global task using ICTs (Gibbs, 2002; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). As virtual teams, they are both geographically distributed across multiple locations and dependent on computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Griffith, Sawyer & Neale, 2003; Lipnick & Stamps, 1997), though they may vary on the degree of each of these characteristics (Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Gibson & Gibbs, 2004). In addition global teams are often characterized by a high level of cultural diversity, as well as dynamic structural arrangements (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004), in which there is high member turnover and collaboration is temporary, informal and project-based (Townsend, DeMarie & Hendrickson, 1998).

Global team members face unique human resource management (HRM) challenges that traditional teams have not had to contend with, because
of the need to coordinate tasks and processes across time, space and multiple layers of cultural complexity (Carmel, 1999). The structural characteristics defining global teams – geographic distribution, electronic dependence, cultural diversity and dynamic structure – result in more loosely coupled team interactions (Gibbs, 2002) and act as centrifugal forces that pull such teams apart through breakdown of coordination, loss of communication 'richness', cultural misunderstandings and loss of 'teamness' (Carmel, 1999). These four key elements of loose coupling (Gibbs, 2002; Weick, 1976) pose HRM-related challenges to global teams. Figure 18.1 summarizes these decoupling characteristics as well as several coupling mechanisms to help coordinate team interaction (Figure 18.1). The challenges will now be discussed in more detail, followed by a discussion of the coupling mechanisms.

Cultural diversity
Global teams face new HRM challenges due to their high degree of cultural diversity. Understanding the impacts of culture, defined broadly as a shared set of meanings or mental programming that shapes individuals' behaviour and interpretations of events (Hofstede, 1991), is even more pressing in today's global organizations, as intercultural interaction affects everyone in the organization rather than being confined to a few people (Adler, 1997). Whereas in the past only expatriates needed to develop cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence, in global firms employees do not need to go abroad or leave their own community to encounter cross-cultural contact, as 'cross-cultural dialogue has become the very foundation on which global business is conducted' (Adler, 1997: 124). Global teams are likely to be more culturally diverse than traditional collocated teams, as not only are team members working across countries and nationalities (for example, Brazilian, German and Japanese), but they are often working across organizational and functional cultures as well. For example, a global product development team may involve collaboration between multiple partner firms (such as a corporation, university and a consulting firm). Its team members are also likely to span a number of functional disciplines, such as design engineering, manufacturing or software engineering and marketing. These cultural contexts are accompanied by deep-rooted assumptions and values that provide an intuitive blueprint or set of guidelines for the way cultural members should behave, as well as helping to reduce uncertainty and normalize events (Schein, 1992). Contextual differences among team members thus lead to different norms, expectations and sets of behaviour regarding work that must be bridged in order for the team to function effectively (Maznevski, 1994).

Culturally diverse teams are likely to differ along several key dimensions, which influence their expectations about working together and are likely to create breakdowns in the communication process (Earley & Gibson, 2002). First, team members' orientation toward work may be conditioned by cultural preferences for individualism versus collectivism. Those from individualistic national cultures place more emphasis on individual goals and personal achievement, while those from collectivistic cultures give priority to group interests and maintaining group harmony (Earley, 1994; Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1988). Differences on this dimension may cause clashes in expectations for team interaction, level of cohesiveness, group (as opposed to individual) rewards and importance of socialization, which are all likely to be greater among those from more collectivistic cultures (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001; Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997). Such cultural clashes are likely to pose HRM-related challenges. For example, team members from collectivistic cultures (such as China, Singapore or Brazil) may expect more
guidance, training, support and socialization from management and other team members than members from individualistic cultures (such as the USA, UK or Germany), who are more likely to prefer working autonomously and expect others to take initiative in finding their own solutions to problems. This dimension also conditions preferences for technology use, as those from collectivistic cultures are more likely to prefer collaborative technologies such as videoconferencing and face-to-face group meetings. On the other hand, those from individualistic cultures may prefer to communicate one-on-one through e-mail and voicemail, which may be considered cold and impersonal by those with a more collectivistic orientation (Gibbs, 2002).

A second key dimension on which national cultures are likely to differ is power distance, which refers to the extent to which hierarchy is valued and respected (Hofstede, 1991). Collaborators from high power distance cultures such as India, France or Japan revere hierarchy and status distinctions, whereas those from low power distance cultures such as the USA, Sweden or the Netherlands attempt to minimize hierarchy and take a more egalitarian approach. This dimension is likely to affect the level of formality expected, likelihood to share knowledge and level of participation in meetings. HRM challenges arise owing to culture clashes that occur face-to-face as well as over e-mail: for example, Americans tend to be more informal in e-mail use, addressing people by first names only, not using formal job titles and employing casual language. This may be construed as impolite or disrespectful by members of high power distance cultures, for whom formal titles indicating status and formal language are more important. Communication challenges are also likely to arise as high power distance employees of lower status may be reluctant to share important information (especially of a negative nature) with higher status managers, for fear of overstepping their bounds or causing them to lose face. While this may be frustrating for low power distance managers, team members from high power distance cultures may be equally put off by failure of low power distance members to assert authority or to recognize status differences, perceiving this as disrespectful.

HRM managers can help overcome the challenges of cultural diversity within global teams by making managers and other team members aware of cultural differences and encouraging them to adapt their communication styles accordingly. For example, managers from individualistic cultures such as the USA should make sure that employees from collectivistic cultures feel supported and have the resources they need, as they may be reluctant to ask questions or raise issues out of concern for face saving and preserving group harmony. Team managers and HRM professionals should consider such cultural differences when training employees, structuring team communication and deciding which communication media to use. Performance incentives, rewards and career opportunities should also be free of biases towards any one culture and should not exclude particular cultures (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992).

Geographical dispersion
Global teams also face unique HRM challenges because of their geographic dispersion. A key difficulty is sharing 'situated knowledge' between locations (Sole & Edmondson, 2002), as team members at different sites or locations are likely to have their own contextual knowledge for granted and be unable to articulate or share that knowledge with members from other sites (Gluesing & Gibson, 2004). This is likely to result in misunderstandings, confusion and conflicts among distant team members owing to gaps in communication resulting in different assumptions and different interpretations of messages (Armstrong & Cole, 2002), as well as the formation of divisive organizational sub-identities associated with locations (Sole & Edmondson, 2002). Additionally the fact that team members are geographically distributed across multiple time zones makes it more difficult to achieve synergy and coordinate team actions (Carmel, 1999). Geographically distributed global teams thus face challenges in sharing contextual knowledge, geographic divisiveness, and coordinating information.

The fact that team members are embedded in different geographical and organizational contexts brings about several specific HRM challenges related to team cohesion and identification. The lack of face-to-face contact among team members in different locations is likely to lead to an 'out of sight, out of mind' tendency to forget about members in other locations that hinders knowledge sharing and communication (Armstrong & Cole, 2002). Team cohesion is likely to be fragmented because of development of distinct sub-identities among locations, especially if they coincide with national differences. Allegiances to local sites rather than the team as a whole may result in competition and rivalry among different locations, rather than collaboration and synergy. Achieving identification with the global team is further problematized by tensions in team structure due to the fact that the team is embedded in different organizational contexts that may be characterized by different reporting and pay structures, policies and evaluation procedures.

Team and HRM professionals can help overcome challenges of geographical dispersion by bringing the entire team together for group meetings periodically or travelling to different locations to provide 'face time' to keep team objectives aligned, ensure that knowledge is shared and build stronger identification with the team. Although tensions due to different
organizational structures and policies may not be entirely resolvable, offering incentives and rewards for team collaboration is another way of ensuring team member 'buy-in' and commitment.

Electronic dependence
Global virtual teams often rely heavily on CMC to collaborate and accomplish work, using a range of technologies such as e-mail, phone, fax, audio- and videoconferencing, collaborative groupware and knowledge management systems (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004). This technology enables them to operate in a flexible manner and coordinate work across time zones and geographical distances (Boudreau, Loch, Robey & Straud, 1998). Technology may help structure work and organize, enhance or even create information available to the team (Griffith et al., 2003). However, communicating virtually rather than face-to-face creates challenges as well. Virtual team members must acquire new skills to communicate electronically, including not just becoming proficient with a variety of computer-based technologies but learning new ways to express themselves and understand others in a virtual environment with reduced social presence and cues (Townsend et al., 1998). Communication via e-mail and other forms of CMC is characterized by the absence of traditional non-verbal social context cues such as facial expressions, gesture and vocal inflection or tone, making it more difficult to convey nuances and subtleties in communication (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). Also the anonymity of CMC has been found to produce different kinds of interpersonal exchanges than face-to-face contact (Hiltz, Johnson & Turoff, 1986); on one hand, it may result in more impersonal communication owing to its reduced social cues, as less personal, tacit or informal information is exchanged; on the other, the lack of social cues may result in exaggerated hyperpersonal perceptions of others (ofly positive or negative) because of overattribution of what limited cues are available (Walther, 1996; Walther & Parks, 2002).

Communicating electronically presents HRM managers with new challenges associated with building personal relationships, trust and responsiveness, because of the lack of context and reduced social cues (see the chapter by Maznevski, Canney Davison and Jonsen in the present volume for further discussion of these issues). Since global team members are physically dispersed, they lack the informal ‘water cooler’ talk that colocated team members take for granted, but that helps team members get to know each others’ personality traits, quirks and work styles, as well as being a source of unexpected and serendipitous information exchange. Research has found that social communication and socialization processes are important for building electronic relationships (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Knoll & Jarvenpaa, 1998). While many companies such as Boeing and Lotus have found bringing global team members together face-to-face at the start of a project to be effective in establishing relationships and building trust (Benson-Armer & Hsieh, 1997), research has found that socialization is also possible over CMC (for example, Walther, 1992, 1995) and that it facilitates trust in virtual team development (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Owing to the reduced cues and context present in CMC, global team members should make more pointed efforts to include personal and informal communication in e-mails and other media, to help build trust and relationships virtually. HRM professionals can play an important role in training team members in effective electronic communication.

Dynamic structure
A final decoupling characteristic that creates HRM challenges for managing global teams is their often dynamic structural arrangements. As many global teams are short-term and project-based, they tend to consist of team members working together only temporarily, with frequent change in members, roles and relationships (Kristof, Brown, Sims & Smith, 1995). Many of these teams comprise inter-firm collaboration through informal outsourcing agreements or consortia, and team members are likely to be reluctant to share knowledge across organizational boundaries because of its proprietary nature. In addition, high member turnover often leads to the loss of tacit knowledge, making it difficult to establish continuity of team processes and practices. The dynamic nature of such collaborations results in increased uncertainty, less cohesive relationships (Gluesing et al., 2003), loss of or difficulty sharing knowledge, and fluid and shifting team membership that evolves according to changing task requirements and responsibilities (Kristof et al., 1995; Townsend et al., 1998).

Global outsourcing teams often involve short-term work arrangements with contracted employees of other nationalities (Carmel, 1999). They are also likely to be embedded within multiple employing organizations with their own distinct organizational structures and policies, making it impossible to standardize policies completely within the team. For example, software development teams at US-based companies such as Intel, Xerox and Microsoft often hire developers from lower-cost talent hubs in India, China or Brazil and bring them to work on short-term project assignments locally. Depending on the length of the assignment (which may end up lasting a year or more), this is likely to create problems for management and assessment of such temporary employees. While on assignment, their performance assessment may suffer, as their permanent managers may be unable to evaluate and assess accurately their work for someone else from thousands of miles away. At the same time, their temporary managers may be reluctant to provide performance feedback because of their low level of
investment in these temporary employees as contractors and their lack of ‘buy-in’ to the different organizational processes and structures of their employing organizations. Even when feedback is provided, it is likely to be limited or difficult to interpret owing to different scoring procedures. As a result, decisions on salary and promotion for such employees may be adversely affected.

Managers may also be averse to provide training and other benefits needed for employees’ career growth because of their low level of investment in such temporary employees, who may in turn harbour feelings of inequity and resentment toward other local permanent team members who do receive such benefits. Local team members, on the other hand, may feel their job security is threatened by outsourced employees. Conversely offering bonuses and incentives to temporary employees may prove problematic as it undermines their local pay scale (as one bonus may be the equivalent of six months’ salary in their home country, for example). HRM systems should ensure that global team members receive performance appraisals and feedback so that their work is rewarded and contributes to their career development.

The next section will discuss three key coupling mechanisms that help overcome these challenges due to loose coupling in global teams.

**Key coupling mechanisms for managing global team complexity**

Although forming a strong, shared team culture may not be either achievable or desirable in global teams owing to their loosely coupled nature (Gibbs, 2002), certain coordination mechanisms are needed to manage cultural complexity, help bridge the loose coupling characteristics and facilitate effective team interaction. Three factors help to couple or coordinate global team interaction: assigning cultural liaisons, increasing team-level identification and documenting or formalizing team communication (Gibbs, 2002).

**Cultural liaisons**

Because of their dispersion across geographies and time zones, it is neither possible nor efficient for all global team members to know what every other team member knows or does, or to interact directly with every other team member. Moreover effective communication and knowledge sharing are also inhibited by cultural and language barriers. Team members are often called upon to make quick decisions without sufficient information, and formal information sources (such as reports or archival documents) are inherently limited to codified, rather than tacit, knowledge (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Given the cost, inefficiency and potential bias of widespread direct communication across boundaries (ibid.), informal social mechanisms such as boundary spanners are more effective for coordinating global team interaction.

Cultural liaisons are a specific type of boundary spanner in global teams for coordinating communication across cultural boundaries. Cultural liaisons serve the role of linking or facilitating understanding and interaction among different cultural groups. They possess the skill of ‘laterality’, which describes the ability to work effectively with and relate to people of different cultural or functional backgrounds, work experiences, skill sets and knowledge bases (Mankin, Cohen & Bikson, 1996). Laterality has been identified as an important skill for intercultural communicators (Cohen & Gibson, 2003), who need to be able to bridge and interpret between different national or functional cultures, speak the language of those they work with, and be confident yet open to learning new things. Research has found that members of productive global teams act as cultural interpreters and mediators and suggests that this role can be taken on by more than just a few members of the team (Hofstee Saphire, 1996). Similar to weak ties in social networks, which function to connect people from diverse backgrounds (Granovetter, 1973) and provide access to a wider array of non-redundant information (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), cultural liaisons play an important role in bridging the various cultural boundaries inherent in global teams. This strategy is particularly effective in teams consisting of two or more strong, defined subcultures, which have been found to elicit the most entrenched cultural conflicts (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Gibson & Veermeulen, 2003). Moderate diversity is more likely to lead to polarization along faultlines than extreme diversity, especially when that diversity is salient (Fiol & O’Connor, 2005; Lau & Murnighan, 1998).

Cultural liaisons may be assigned to the role by the team leader or human resource professional, or they may emerge informally, out of necessity or convenience. For example, a manager of a global software team distributed between the USA and Singapore may bring a few Singaporean team members to work temporarily in the USA to train them on the project and facilitate knowledge exchange in person before sending them back to continue the work in Singapore. During this time, assigning to one or more of the Singaporean team members the informal role of coordinating communication between the two sites is an effective strategy, as it helps reduce intercultural misunderstanding over e-mail, phone or videoconferencing, and helps establish a stronger relationship between the two sites by using one consistent interface which has the same cultural background and often has established personal relationships with those at the remote site. This makes mediated communication across distances much more effective than having relative strangers from different cultures interact with one another.
by phone, e-mail or videoconferencing. It also facilitates knowledge sharing between locations.

Cultural liaisons can also be effective in providing informal cultural orientation to team members who may be temporarily based overseas, as is common in software outsourcing teams. Although provision of formal intercultural training and orientation to assist such outsourced employees in adjusting to the foreign culture by a human resource professional is optimal, teams may not have the budget for this or have the number of members to make formal programmes cost-effective. In this case, assigning to team members with longer-term experience in the foreign culture the role of cultural mentors may be a preferable solution. Team members with greater international experience and a higher comfort level with living abroad, greater intercultural communication competence and laterality skills should be sought as cultural mentors. These cultural liaisons can help orient new arrivals: meeting them at the airport, helping them get situated and passing on cultural advice to them about their new work environment, as well as acting as intermediaries to voice their concerns to the team leader or management. These liaisons can also help bridge cultural divides within the team by organizing team-building social events, facilitating cross-cultural social interaction among team members from diverse cultures and helping mediate interpersonal conflicts among such team members.

**Identification**

Identification has been defined as a sense of belonging with a social category (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Fiol & O’Connor, 2005). Through identification, individuals achieve a sense of social connectedness with others, which facilitates communication, understanding and a common purpose (Gossett, 2002). Social identification processes increase group members’ identification with a strategic group (Lant & Phelps, 1999). Identification has been found to increase interpersonal trust and cooperation (Brewer, 1981; Kramer, 1993), group cohesion (Turner, 1987), internalization of organizational norms and practices, worker satisfaction (Russo, 1998) and desire to stay with the organization (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994).

Identification has been advocated as particularly critical in virtual contexts because of the reduced physical contact among members (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 2001), as it facilitates coordination and control of employees, which is a key challenge owing to the lack of direct supervision or monitoring in distributed teams (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1999). Organizational identification is theorized to be a new post-bureaucratic form of unobtrusive or concerted control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), in which individual members are influenced by organizational goals, values and information through subtle rhetorical persuasion to make decisions that reflect organizational goals (Cheney, 1983). Identification in virtual teams is argued to act as a type of social ‘glue’ that promotes group cohesion in the absence of face-to-face contact (Fiol & O’Connor, 2005). Wiesenfeld et al. (1999) examined communication behaviour as a determinant of organizational identification and found that information technologies such as e-mail and phone could help create and maintain identification or a common identity among virtual workers, helping connect them to their organizations.

Identification in global teams is further complicated by the fact that team members possess multiple identities derived from the different contexts in which the team is embedded. Identification is likely to occur at multiple levels: with one’s organization, one’s team, one’s national culture or one’s functional or professional culture (Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998). In addition, individuals are often members of multiple teams (Townsend et al., 1998), and are thus likely to struggle with multiple competing allegiances and affiliations, making it harder to induce identification with a particular team. Inducing team-level identification helps overcome divisive subidentities associated with sites or locations, as well as national or functional subcultures within the team that pose a challenge to team building (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003). It also helps build trust, which is crucial to social bonding and establishing relationships in virtual teams (see the chapter by Maznevski et al. in the present volume for further discussion of trust formation in global teams).

Maintaining an identified workforce requires a high level of organizational investment and effort (Gossett, 2002). Overcoming such divisive sub-cultural identities and inducing team-level identification requires continuing team-building efforts. Team and HRM managers should attempt to break up cultural cliques within the team through the use of physical space and division of work, by attempting to mix cultural groups in office arrangements and work roles to foster intercultural collaboration and linguistic desegregation. Social events and mixers are important means of team building. In addition, physical symbols such as badges and office name plates play a role in inducing identification and belonging to the team. Identification can be fostered electronically as well, through creation of a team Internet or webpage containing information about team members, such as the office layout for each location with names and photos of each team member and a brief description of their role and personal interests or hobbies. Finally, incentives should be provided for accomplishing team tasks to ensure that teamwork is valued.

**Documentation**

Written documentation of team processes and norms is a final important coupling mechanism in global teams. Given the high level of diversity in
team members’ knowledge, skills, functional and cultural backgrounds and the high task complexity, combined with the need to collaborate virtually with dispersed others who may never meet in person, global team environments and relationships among team members are fraught with uncertainty. Regular, predictable communication has been identified as helping reduce some of this uncertainty, build and maintain trust over time (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) and provide a rhythm for team functioning that imposes structure and stability in an otherwise chaotic environment (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). The combination of diversity of cultural norms, establishment of new relationships in electronic environments, and spatial and temporal discontinuity makes the need for explicit and predictable communication even greater in global teams.

One way of making global team communication more predictable is through formalization and documentation of team knowledge and processes. Documentation is a coupling mechanism that helps preserve temporal as well as spatial continuity of the team, despite turnover of team members. Documentation reduces the impact of turnover by preserving knowledge. There is a greater need for explicit definition of process in virtual teams, in which communicating and establishing shared norms is not as intuitive as in face-to-face environments (Leonard, Brands, Edmondson & Fenwick, 1998). Norms and expectations for team interaction also need to be explicitly negotiated and agreed upon in culturally diverse groups in order for such groups to be effective, as these norms are culturally conditioned and not shared by all team members (Maznevski, 1994). While the process of negotiating norms for group interaction and participation is implicit and almost automatic when group members have common repertoires of norms, group members with diverse norms need to negotiate explicitly the ways in which the group will interact and operate in order to be effective (ibid.). Agreement on the way communication is coordinated and prioritized will increase predictability and help to overcome the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ feeling among dispersed team members (Snow, Snell, Davison & Hambrick, 1996). Establishing clear communication protocols with explicit norms for team member interaction, participation, policies and expectations for communication (how often to communicate, expected response time, which media to use, prioritization of issues, decision making and conflict resolution processes, and so on) has been found to improve global team performance (Carmel, 1999; Knoll & Jarvenpaa, 1998; Leonard et al., 1998; Snow et al., 1996). This can be facilitated by the use of databases and groupware (Snow et al., 1996).

Written documentation also helps overcome language and cultural barriers. It is helpful in providing clear instructions, especially cross-culturally and across languages, as it allows for more time to deliberate before responding and greater understanding of messages. Documentation can thus be helpful in surfacing cross-cultural misunderstandings, especially when working remotely. It can also be used to overcome cultural differences in knowledge sharing; for example, HRM managers can develop formalized training methods consisting of standardized questions for team members who for cultural reasons are more introverted to extract knowledge they may be reluctant to volunteer. A final benefit of documentation is in formalizing team processes to motivate and bring remote workers together as a team. Documentation reduces the need for face-to-face interaction and it enables effective collaboration between geographically dispersed coworkers who have never met face-to-face. Face-to-face training is thus only necessary for transferring expertise or knowledge that was not documented.

Global team leaders require a different skill set than managers of traditional, collocated teams (see the chapter by Maznevski et al. in the present volume for further discussion of leadership issues). Global managers need to possess a global mindset (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2001), defined in terms of a cosmopolitan orientation or openness to diverse cultural outlooks and experiences and a sense of cognitive complexity or ability to discern the complexity of issues and reconcile apparently incongruent pieces (Boyanigiller, Beechler, Taylor & Levy, 2004). HRM professionals can play a key role in helping global team leaders develop needed process or ‘group’ skills in addition to technical expertise (Davison, 1994) since they play a crucial role as process facilitator that differs from the traditional role of the leader as the hierarchical authority or technical expert (Hofner Saphiere, 1996). HRM professionals should also provide team members with training on the need to develop explicit communication protocols documenting team processes and assist them in developing archival databases and knowledge management systems to preserve team knowledge. Finally HRM systems should provide incentives to encourage busy team members to invest the time and effort required to document team knowledge, as they are unlikely to do so without a perceived benefit or mandate.

Conclusion
Global teams are fragmented by decoupling characteristics of cultural diversity, geographical dispersion, electronic dependence and dynamic structural arrangements, which pose distinct international HRM challenges. To overcome such challenges, three coupling mechanisms are proposed to assist HRM professionals in coordinating global team interaction amidst these decoupling characteristics: assigning boundary-spanning cultural liaisons helps to bridge cultural diversity within the team and to
facilitate electronic communication among distributed team members, inducing team-level identification helps build trusting virtual relationships and overcome challenges of knowledge sharing and coordination due to geographical dispersion, and documentation of knowledge helps overcome challenges associated with turnover and temporal discontinuity due to dynamic structural arrangements. These coupling mechanisms highlight the need for both formal and informal communication in coordinating global teams.

Human resource professionals can play a key role in appointing cultural liaisons to mediate communication across cultural boundaries and providing training on effective intercultural communication to other team members. Additional training needs include effective technology use, leadership skills and global mindset in global team managers, and the need for formalization of team processes and norms through explicit communication protocols, archival databases and knowledge management systems. HRM managers should also provide incentives for sharing and documenting knowledge, as well as continuing team-building efforts and a clear reporting structure to induce and maintain team-level identification. Incentives, rewards and career opportunities should be commensurate with work performed globally (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992) and thus linked with global teamwork. Finally, ensuring that global team members’ responsibilities contribute to their career development will help retain them for future projects and facilitate trust through continuity of working relationships.

Future research in this area should seek to fill gaps left by the current research on global virtual teams. First, it should make further attempts to integrate disparate literature on each of the decoupling characteristics (cultural diversity, geographical dispersion, electronic dependence and dynamic structure) and test the interactions between them. Much of the research on multicultural and virtual teams examines variables such as cultural diversity or extent of face-to-face interaction in isolation, despite the fact that many global teams are both culturally diverse and virtual in nature and thus involve complex interactions between these elements. Other research lumps these elements together under the term ‘virtual’ without examining their independent effects (Gibson & Gibbs, 2004) and, as a result, imprecise definitions of ‘virtuality’ have led to contradictory findings (Fiol & O’Connor, 2005). Several researchers have called for the need to distinguish among various features of virtual teaming (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Griffith et al., 2003), but systematic theory on the interrelationships among such features is just starting to be developed (for example, Fiol & O’Connor, 2005; Gibson & Gibbs, 2004; Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004).

Second, future research should examine effects and processes in different types of global teams. Theory is emerging that differentiates between pure virtual teams and ‘hybrid’ virtual teams involving some face-to-face contact (Fiol & O’Connor, 2005). Virtual team contexts also vary by the degree of permanence (temporary versus continuous teams), team size and the nature of work being performed (sales versus product development teams, for example). The impacts of such factors should be tested in future research to add nuance to theory on global teams and help identify strategies for overcoming specific HRM challenges related to each of these factors. More research on the way the decoupling characteristics of global teams interact in different global team settings will assist HRM professionals in developing sophisticated solutions to the complex challenges that arise in global teams.

References


Decoupling and coupling in global teams


