# Straight from the horse's mouth: Justifications and prevention strategies provided by free riders on global virtual teams

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**Abstract:**

The study investigates the reasons for and ways to deal with free riding on Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) based on interviews with 77 documented "free-riders" themselves. Our unique sample, in contrast with more commonly-studied accounts from active team members or project managers, provides direct insights into the thinking of free-riders. Taken together, our interview data suggest that free riders (1) emerge in the early stages of team development, (2) due to several distinct reasons, of which lack of time, team coordination, and communication methods/channels are most common, (3) when confronted with unimpeachable evidence of their guilt, tend to attribute their failure to contribute to external forces, (4) often fall victim to subtle cultural differences and forces, and (5) could have been saved by prevention strategies that would target the different reasons for free-riding. From these conclusions, we synthesize and discuss implications for management education and training across national borders.

**Keywords:** free riding | global virtual teams | interview | team coordination | communication

**Article:**

*****Note: Full text of article below**

*Research Paper*

# Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Justifications and Prevention Strategies Provided by Free Riders on Global Virtual Teams

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## Abstract

We investigate the causes of and ways to deal with *free riding*, that is, a lack of contribution to team effort, in global virtual teams (GVTs). In contrast with more commonly-studied accounts from active team members or project managers, this study is based on direct feedback from 77 documented "free-riders" themselves. Our data suggest that free riding occurs (1) in the early stages of team development, (2) frequently due to difficulty with communication methods/channels and poor coordination, (3) mostly by individuals who tend to blame external forces for their lack of participation, even when confronted with unimpeachable evidence to the contrary, and (4) much less frequently, if at all, by parties who fall victim to subtle cultural differences and forces. We use these findings to develop testable propositions and discuss potential free-riding prevention strategies.

**Keywords:**Free riding, Global virtual teams, Interview, Team Coordination, Communication

## Introduction

A shift from assembly-line of the industrialization era to organic organizational designs of today has brought about a wide spread use of work teams in organizations. With more recent developments in communication technologies, the need for the team members to be co-located has disappeared. Indeed, between 50 and 70 percent of all white-collar workers in OECD countries at least occasionally engage in virtual collaborations of some sort, 20 to 35 percent of which cross national borders, and the number of such Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) is increasing (*c.f.*, Duarte & Snyder, 2011; Kurtzberg, 2014). Though GVTs offer various advantages, particularly in terms of flexibility with respect to geography and timing, the physical and psychological distances they involve fundamentally change the way team members gather, share, exchange information, and make decisions. These changes, in turn, can complicate monitoring team progress and individual contributions and thus exacerbate an endemic team problem: *free riding*

(Pillis & Furumo, 2007).

Free riding refers to making little or no contribution to team efforts while sharing in team rewards (Jones, 1984). Though similar in nature, free riding is distinct from other forms of *withholding effort* in collective contexts such as *shirking*, *social loafing*, and *free-loading* (Albanese & Fleet., 1985; Judge & Chandler, 1996; Taras, Gil, & Tullar, 2016). Free riding specifically concerns withholding efforts on teams who share both responsibility and remuneration whereas the other phenomena concern different contexts. Shirking, for instance, refers to leaving work obligations unfilled irrespective of work role, that is, as an individual contributor or as a member of a team or group. Social loafing, like free riding, occurs on teams, but refers to the general tendency to reduce effort as team size increases (Earley, 1993) regardless of collective outcomes. Finally, free loading refers to receiving a benefit from a collective outcome without contributing to it, independent of role (team member or not) or process (*e.g.*, as a function of team size). In sum, free riders belong to teams and get the same reward as their teammates despite making little or no contribution, that is, they get a "free ride" without pulling their weight.

Given the potential for free riding to undermine the success of GVTs and their organizations, we conducted the present research to identify why members of GVTs free ride. Specifically, we surveyed 77 individuals identified by their teammates as free riders. Their responses provide preliminary insights as to why they failed to contribute to their GVTs, future directions scholars can take to develop more rigorous theories of free riding on GVTs, as well as how managers might prevent it in an increasingly globalized world. Obtaining and considering free riders' perspectives facilitates the identification of common reasons for free-riding in GVTs and provides clues as to how managers can prevent and remediate free riding in GVTs.

## Prevalence of Free-Riding in GVTs

Decades of research in social psychology, organizational psychology, and communication studies have shown that the social context creates a powerful set of forces that influence cognitions and behaviors when working on teams. These forces often keep certain deviant social behaviors, such as free riding, in check (Burnstein & Vinokur, 1973; Hackman, 1987; Maass & Clark, 1984). Virtual teams, however, represent a substantially different social context than their face-to-face counterparts (Hackman, 2002). In traditional face-to-face teams, social obligation and reciprocity among team members naturally arise as a result of team members' direct interaction, shared experiences, common interests, and integration in one another's personal networks, including those external to the team. Virtual teams, in contrast, involve greater separation in time, space, and geography weakening common social forces between team members and, thereby, removing the social pressures that minimize free-riding (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). In addition, coordination of team activities can become a big obstacle when team members are not in the same physical location (Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003; Taras *et al.*, 2013; Lacerenza, Zajac, Savage, & Salas, 2015). Cultural and language differences common to GVTs, further dissociate team members by inhibiting the formation of shared social identities, which would otherwise mitigate free-riding tendencies. Differences in communication patterns and styles, such as in decision-making, disagreeing, and providing negative feedback (Meyer, 2014) can also result in misunderstandings. Moreover, communication in GVTs is heavily technology-dependent, which further increases task complexity and invisibility and, thus, the potential for free riding. In sum, the factors that potentially contribute to free riding increase substantially when teams go virtual.

Understanding if, when, and how these factors specifically contribute to free-riding in GVTs requires controlled empirical study. Researchers often find conducting such studies difficult for two reasons. First, the heterogeneity of

GVTs often complicates the systematic study thereof. Though many large multinationals have hundreds of teams engaging in virtual collaboration at any given time, each team is very different in terms of when they engage in their projects and how long they work on them, the size and composition of the team, the management and incentive structure, the task and work design, and various other factors that could have a major impact on the team dynamics and performance. Second, even if researchers could identify an organization with a large number of relatively similar teams working on relatively similar tasks, concerns with privacy make the likelihood that such an organization would permit external researchers to interact with those teams and identify free riding and free riders even more remote. Typically, researchers have been limited to surveying individuals about their experiences with free riding on teams and explanations thereof. Self-serving and self-presentation biases, of course, threaten the validity of such data (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980).

The psychological needs to maintain positive self-concept and social image make people surveyed about free riding on teams far more inclined to recall and recount free riding by others, especially if their own contributions fell short of expectations (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Moreover, recollecting such instances will often bring back negative feelings due to the tacit if not overt conflicts that emerges between members over relative believe they contributions leading them to further skew their accounts. Consequently, management scholars seldom get a complete picture of free riding from multiple points of view. This is unfortunate because free riders ultimately are the only ones who know whether they in fact free rode and, if so, why they did. Our involvement in a large-scale learning exercise, however, provided us the unique opportunity to overcome these limitations.

Specifically, access to 737 relatively homogeneous GVTs enabled us to engage 77 individuals identified by their teammates as free riders. Surveying these alleged free riders enabled us to get straight from the proverbial horses' mouths whether the they believed that they had free rode and why. Due to lack of theoretical and empirical precedent, we took an exploratory approach to studying alleged free riders' accounts of their experiences. That is, rather than articulate and test a priori theory and hypotheses, we used these individuals' accounts of how they saw themselves and the circumstances leading up to their ejection from their teams as a starting point to distill testable propositions for why free riding occurs on GVTs and how managers can the remediate it. To our knowledge, the present study represents the first attempt to look at the phenomenon of free-riding in GVTs from the free-rider's perspective.

## Causes and Consequences of Free-Riding

Rather than test existing theories of what causes free-riding in teams, we conducted this study with a blank-slate approach. That is, we set out to explore free riding based on the insights provided by the free-riders themselves. Given, however, that we are hardly the first to address this topic, a short review of relevant theory and terminology is warranted. To put the problem of free-riding in proper perspective, we first address its multiplicative, negative effect on team performance. Given that the best solutions address root causes, we then highlight the several known causes of free riding.

## Consequences of Free Riding

Taras, Tullar, Steel, O'Neil, and McLarnon (2016) reviewed the empirical evidence available so far on the detrimental effects of free-riding. The have found dozens of studies that showed that free-riding damages job and team satisfaction, motivation, team commitment and cohesion, increases job burnout, and ultimately damages team performance. The

overall effects were rather strong, with correlations exceeding 0.60 in some cases, which is up to three times higher than the average effect reported in social sciences (Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003).

Furthermore, the net loss induced by a free riding team member is often *greater* than if that person were legitimately absent from the team (*e.g.*, for health reasons, job reassignment, *etc.*). In more quantitative terms, one free rider on a team of ten typically leads a performance losses greater than 10 percent (Taras, Tullar, *et al.*, 2016). This multiplicative effect occurs because, in addition to lost labor contribution, free-riding imposes complicates coordination and diminishes morale. Whereas the effect of the reduced labor force is linear and directly proportional to the percent of the team member's time lost due to free-riding, the combined effect of all three components leads to a disproportionally rapid performance loss in response even to a minor occurrence of free-riding.

## Causes of Free Riding

Among the causes of free riding, team composition appears to play a particularly important role. Despite the documented benefits of diversity, it may also fuel free riding. People prefer to associate with those who are similar and therefore familiar to them, be it in terms of race, ethnic, origin or social status, or attitudes and beliefs (Williams & O'Reilly III, 1998). Therefore, homogeneity can facilitates and diversity can hurt team integration and cohesion (Watson & Kumar, 1992). As diversity increases, the members of the team have less in common, have less trust, feel less connected, the sense of social reciprocity and obligation that prevents free-riding vanishes (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Katsikeas, Skarmeas, & Bello, 2009). Furthermore, the social queues and communicating patters are more likely to differ across cultures making misunderstandings likely (Boiney, 2001). Genuine effort to contribute and desire to connect may go unnoticed due to misinterpretation of the signals due to cultural or demographic differences (Barna, 1994; Maznevski, 1994; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998; Wlotko & Federmeier, 2012). The challenges will only be aggravated by the virtual nature of collaboration where low-context low-media-richness communication channels further limit opportunities for effective social exchange (Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007a, 2007b). Thus, free-riding is more likely to occur in larger and more diverse teams.

Independent of team composition, the identifiability of individual effort operates as a strong predictor of free-riding (Adams, 1965). Employees working in teams are often faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, they may seek to conserve energy and resources and contribute to the team as little as possible; on the other hand, they fear that a lack of contribution may lead to a retribution. This fear often forces them to make a fair effort or at least create an appearance of such contribution. However, in situations when individual effort is not easily identifiable, withholding effort appears a logical choice as it diminishes the probability of retribution for an insufficient contribution to the team. This logic is very simple and intuitive. People only cheat when chances of being caught and punished are small. Though teamwork designs that make individual effort easily identifiable can reduce free riding drastically, identifying teammates' effort is still a function of social perception, which, left unmanaged, can unnecessarily fuel free riding.

When members GVTs perceive that teammates have received disproportionate credit or rewards relative to their contribution, they may also engage in free-riding (George, 1995; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski, & Bennett, 2004). By way of explanation, any perceived differences among team members' contribution-reward ratios will induce feelings of injustice and inequity and, thus, desires to restore balance (Adams, 1965). Though an obvious option to restore balance would be to reduce the rewards assigned to overcompensated colleagues, performance evaluations and remuneration are often exclusively at managers' discretion. When this is so, the next immediately available option to bring contribution-reward ratios into balance is for team members to reduce their own efforts. Unfortunately, such

reductions in effort can trigger perceptions of inequity among other team members, ultimately, leading to a death spiral of reciprocal free riding. That is, once one member of team withholds effort, the other members have strong incentives to immediately reciprocate. The sooner one stops contributing, the better one's final contribution-reward ratio will be. The team member who stops contributing last will end up with the lowest reward-performance ratio. Taras and colleagues call this the "rotten apple" cycle (2016).

Finally, lack of clarity regarding expectations can make free riding more likely. That is, when team members do not fully understand what is expected of them, they may fail to contribute their fair simply because they are uncertain what they should do. There are various other factors that promote free riding in this way, many of which, fall under the responsibility of management. For instance, poor communication, coordination, and leadership all contribute to lack of clarity about expected behavior been shown to cause free-riding (Høigaard *et al.*, 2010).

## Summary

Free-riding multiply negative effects on team dynamics and performance, including team morale, team commitment, satisfaction, performance, and more. It leads to dissatisfaction and conflict, which in turn damages just about every aspect of teamwork and performance. In their meta-analysis of the literature on the causes and consequences of free-riding, Taras and colleagues (2016) reported that free-riding is a comparatively very strong contributing factor to lack of motivation, reduced team cohesion, job and team satisfaction, and ultimately team performance. The goal of the present study is to gain insights into their underlying causes from individuals identified as free riders by their teammates. As will be discussed further, our findings are generally consistent with prior literature, but the insights provided by the free-riders themselves offer an extra layer of richness and understanding of the phenomenon.

## Method

### *Research setting*

The X-Culture project (www.X-Culture.org) was used as the research platform for the present study. X-Culture is an 8-week large-scale international experiential learning project that involves over 3,500 MBA and business students from 100 universities from 40 countries on six continents every semester. The students are placed in global virtual teams of 5 to 7 people, each team member coming from a different country. The teams complete a business consulting project, involving market research, entry plan development, and product design, for a multi-national company.

The project environment closely emulates those in which the corporate global virtual teams operate. Like their corporate counterparts, X-Culture teams have to accomplish specific objectives, and to communicate across geographical, cultural, and temporal divides all in English. They also have autonomy to choose the extent and type of communication methods they would use; each team has access to free collaboration tools, such as email, voice and video conferencing tools (*e.g.*, Skype), document and collaboration platforms (*e.g.*, Google Docs and Dropbox), and social media (*e.g.*, Facebook and Google +) as they would ordinarily have in a corporate environment. Also, as in the corporate world, the outcomes of X-Culture projects have significant implications. Given that the project accounts for 20 to 50% of the course grade, failing the project usually means failing the course and delaying graduation. On the more positive side, members of the best teams receive invitations and funding to annual symposia where they meet their teammates and managers from the client organizations in person, take part in various career development

workshops and seminars, meet with local entrepreneurs and community leaders, and some even receive offers of employment from client organizations. Taken together, the parallels between corporate and X-Culture GVTs provide satisfactory external validity for the purposes of the present research.

## *Sample*

A total of 3,725 MBA and undergraduate business students (52% female, average age 25.1 years) took part in the 2015 2nd round of the X-Culture competition. Of those, 95 (2.6%) were identified as free-riders. That is, in the weekly surveys, two or more weeks in a row, the super-majority (67 percent or more) of their team members indicated that these people "did absolutely nothing and should be excluded from the team." Likewise, their peer evaluations on the effort dimension were close to 1 (average 1.3 on a 5-point scale, with 1=very poor, 5=excellent). Team members who received low peer evaluations (pee-evaluated effort below 2.0 out of 5.0) and a majority vote to be excluded from the team for "free-riding" the first time would be warned and put on "probation." If their contributions did not improve in two weeks, they would be labeled as "free-riders" and, commonly, excluded from the team. Those were the people we sought to survey for this study.

All 95 free-riders were contacted after the completion of the project and asked to tell their side of the story on their lack of contribution in their team. Since it was prohibitively difficult to have a live Skype or phone interview with each of them, we sent them a list of open-ended questions we would have asked in a structured interview and asked them to provide written detailed responses. Although these 95 individuals were absent most of the time during the project, surprisingly 77 of them responded to our request, representing an 81.1% response rate.

## *Interview questions*

The interview questions contain information concerning respondents' overall attitudes about their conduct, timing at which problems occurred, the reasons or the triggers for withdrawing effort, other team processes respondents may have experienced, and suggested prevention strategies and comments. The complete list of questions is presented below.

1. Your team says you were not investing enough time into the project; that you did not work very hard and your contribution was too small. Is this true?
2. At what point did you start having problems with your team? Did it all go well first and then the situation got worse, or was it not working well from the very beginning?
3. Can you describe the problems that caused you to not work very hard, or to stop working very hard on the X-Culture project?
4. The problems you experienced: was it a one-time thing, or did the situation improve at some point and then got worse again?
5. Did your team have a team leader (formal or informal)? If so, was that person helping the situation or making it worse?
6. Did you experience any interpersonal conflicts in the team? If so, can you please tell what caused them and how were they resolved?
7. Do you think it was only you who had problems with the team, or there were more team members who were in the same situation?
8. If you had to do it again, what would you do differently this time?

9. What could be done to prevent the problem of one or more team members dropping out and not fully contributing to the team?
10. Anything you would like to add or comment on?

### *Response Coding*

We coded responses to these questions (Mean = 290 words) using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We established the code book reflected in Table 1 to facilitate deeper understanding of the experiences and views of these free-riders. Because responses often wandered away from the issues to which the questions referred, we used each answer to code all attributes to which it applied. For example, if the answer referred to the stage when free-riding occurred, the stage was recorded as per our code book, regardless of whether the question referred to stages, or the information provided applied to a different question.

The responses were independently coded by two trained coders. The third and fourth authors then reviewed the coding and reconciled the few (5.8%) cases in which the codes differed.

## Results

### *Failure to accept responsibility*

When asked if they made any contribution to team effort, only 35.1% of the 77 surveyed study participants (n = 27) fully admitted making none. Even though each individual was presented with very strong empirical evidence of their free-riding (multiple sets of complaints in weekly peer evaluations provided by super-majority of their team members), most (42.8%, n = 33) said that the attributions were not entirely true, and 22.1% (n = 17) completely denied that they failed to contribute. Rather than admit to free riding, most tried to come up with exculpatory explanations when confronted with documentation of their lack of contribution.

Based on what the respondents said in the entire interview script, we further classified respondents' level of contribution into four categories as shown in Table 1. Despite their claims to the contrary, most of the respondents (55.8%) implied that they contributed little or nothing to their team projects. This drastic increase over explicit admissions of free-riding broke down as follows: 10.4% acknowledged failing to contribute in the beginning of the project, but claimed to have contributed later, 9.1% stopped in the middle for a while, and 7.8% argued to have contributed sufficiently and to have been unjustly voted off their teams. We found the remaining cases too ambiguous to exclusively categorize.

### *Timing*

Most free-riding (72.7%) began at the beginning of the project, shortly after team formation. Only 13% of the free-riding cases began in the final stage.

### *Reasons for free-riding*

Table 2 provides the frequency and percentage each reason was mentioned by the respondents. Respondents generally gave more than 2 reasons (ranging from 1 to 6) for their lack of contribution, with an average of 2.57 reasons.

Table 1 Code Book

| **Variable label** | **Define values** |
|---|---|
| Whether you admit that you engaged in free-riding | 1 = Admit<br>2 = Partial denial<br>3 = Denial |
| Specify the stage when problem occurred | 1 = Early<br>2 = Middle<br>3 = Late |
| Specify why you engaged in free-riding (assign multiple values whenever applicable) | 1 = Personal justification – sick<br>2 = Personal justification - did not have time<br>3 = Personal justification - got lost at some point<br>4 = Personal justification - other (*e.g.*, discriminated against, didn't like my team)<br>5 = My team ostracized me (did not accept me, failed to recognize my contribution, gave me unfairly low evaluations)<br>6 = Other people on the team were "bad" apples (didn't do anything), so I stopped contributing<br>7 = Poor coordination among team members<br>8 = Time-zone differences<br>9 = Communication methods or/and channels (communication other than #7)<br>10 = Language differences/barriers<br>11 = Cultural differences |
| Level of contribution | 1 = Didn't do it at the beginning, but contributed later<br>2 = Stopped working for a short while (*e.g.*, vacation, busy at work)<br>3 = Didn't contribute much<br>4 = Contributed a lot, but was on probation |
| Specify whether there was a team leader | 1 = Formal leader<br>2 = Informal leader<br>3 = No leader |
| Indicate whether you experienced interpersonal conflict in the team | 1 = Yes<br>0 = No |
| Indicate whether free-riding occurred to other members in the team | 1 = Yes<br>0 = No |
| Indicate if you would do differently in future | 1 = Would do better on my part<br>2 = Would prefer to work with different people/others change<br>3 = Nothing/Not really |

A personal justification of lack of time topped the list, mentioned by 46 out of 77 respondents, representing 59.7% of the cases. However, instead of admitting that they did not want to devote time to the teamwork, respondents tended to frame the situation as if they were too committed to other work and study responsibilities. A typical response

Table 2 Reasons for Free-Riding

| Reasons | # of times | % |
|---|---|---|
| Personal justification - did not have time | 46 | 59.7% |
| Poor coordination among team members | 37 | 48.1% |
| Communication methods or/and channels | 29 | 37.7% |
| My team ostracized me | 22 | 28.6% |
| Time-zone dispersion | 15 | 19.5% |
| Personal justification - sick | 11 | 14.3% |
| Personal justification - other (*e.g.*, didn't like my team) | 9 | 11.7% |
| Cultural differences | 6 | 7.8% |
| Other people on the team didn't do anything, so I stopped contributing | 5 | 6.5% |
| Language differences/barriers | 5 | 6.5% |

reads: "*Situation worsened since late September, due to changes in my work that caused more responsibilities. In late October also I had exams and projects in my MBA.*" However, in some cases, the explanation sounds more of a scheduling issue. For example, one response reads, "*I had informed my team members about my travel commitments in our first interaction and they had agreed to accommodate my situation. I took up a higher part of the workload in the initial weeks as I knew that I will be unavailable later on. During this period of travel, I was busy throughout and was not in a position to contribute to the milestones.*"

Nearly half of the respondents (48.1%) attributed their lack of contribution to poor coordination among team members. This is not surprising because this factor has been identified as the biggest challenge for global virtual collaborations in a similar research setting (Taras *et al.*, 2013). In our sample, an example reads, "*It was like talking to wall, no one answered. I was alone at project so I couldn't find the way to do it myself.*" Another reads, "*There was no work distribution or organization.*" A similar case reads, "*No one defined the task. Just two people did all the work and then put bad grades (for me)*". A mild explanation reads, "*I started having problems when the issue of dividing the members into subgroups came up. Some rejected the group they were posted while others insisted to change their group but then did absolute nothing nor participated in the task given.*"

Interestingly, communication methods/channels, as a point of failure unique from mere coordination, ranked third (37.7%), indicating that the inability to access or use the communication tool the team had chosen was quite a challenge in GVTs which rely heavily on telecommunications. Notably, prior research has shown that communication tool preferences may vary by gender and age, which could have further complicated the situation (*c.f.*, Boiney, 2001). One respondent commented, "*It was frustrating. I never used the APP and I didn't think that was the best way to converse.*" Another indicated, "*I could not use the APP they switched to and no one responded to emails where we originally communicated.*" In a more detailed comment, an apparently alienated free-rider commented, "*When I informed the team that I was unable to use the chosen communication method, one teammate responded to me and informed me that they were to continue using Facebook. After one more reply to them, informing them that I was unable to create a fake account, which is against my employer's policy, no replies were sent my way after this for the remainder of the project.*"

The problem of time-zone dispersion was also salient, making up 19.5% of the cases. As one respondent indicated, "*Since most of members are from the same time zone, I was the only one who couldn't respond quickly. I was really interested in working on this project, so I was asking many questions after they finished chatting. But because of the time difference, they started ignoring my question, and I felt tired to ask, and then I felt tired to contribute*", the inability to communicate with the team and get feedback instantly due to time-zone dispersion can demotivate people and discourage them from contributing.

It is worth noting that cultural and language differences, while identified as challenges for global virtual collaborations (Taras *et al.*, 2013), did not appear to be the major reasons for free-riding. However, language and cultural differences are often underlying causes of conflict, even though they might not be identified as such by participants (Meyer, 2014).

## *Other team dynamics mentioned by the free-riders*

***Leadership.*** According to the respondents, only 15.6% of the teams clearly had a formal leader, while others may have had informal leaders or no leader at all. One respondent noted that "*Our team did not have a formal leader. Honestly speaking one or more people, including me, emerged as a team leader occasionally but none of them drew my attention or find out what the problem was. They just went ahead to exclude me.*" Another stated, "*We didn't have a team leader, however, what was so shocking to me was that no one reached out to check on me. When I recovered I logged into my email and saw the warning probation status.*" The answers suggested that some free-riders might have had legitimate reasons for the lack of contribution; they were trying their best and would have performed well, had it not been for poor (or a lack of) leadership in the team.

***Interpersonal conflict.*** Conflict would be expected to be a contributing factor to free-riding. However, only 6 out of 77 (7.8%) free-riders experienced interpersonal conflict. While the frequency seems low, once conflict occurred, it was perceived rather intense. One respondent stated that, "*I did feel a sense of discrimination because I am a person of color (not playing the victim role). There were plenty of times a new conversation would start after my opinion was given.*" However, we could not discern various reasons for such a low occurrence rate. On the one hand, it is possible that interpersonal conflict does occur less often in GVTs because virtual team members are typically focused on the tasks rather than the relational issues (Ferrazzi, 2012), but on the other hand, free-riders might not even participate in the team activities to experience conflicts.

***Implicit norms.*** A good portion of the respondents (36.8%) indicated that they believed that others were underperforming too and thus felt that their own lack of effort was acceptable or justifiable. This type of response suggests that some free riders follow a "herd mentality" whereby individuals in a team tend to act collectively and that deviance is more likely when others engage in it. As one respondent noted, "*Nobody in my group seemed to work hard. Why should I do more work than others?*" Unfortunately, such perceptions seem more imagined than real as our records suggest that other team members did the work, while the person in question showed zero effort for a period of a few weeks. Nevertheless, it remains plausible that a perception that others were not working and failing to do so was acceptable led to diminished effort.

## *Prevention strategies*

Despite their negative experience with their teams, most of these "free-riders" (51.9%) had clearly and candidly expressed their genuine willingness to do better on their part at the end of the interview. Many indicated that "*I*

*will try to devote more time and effort for the project*", whereas some even expressed their willingness to take the initiative and lead the team. However, 14.3% of the respondents still blamed the team and 3.9% said they would do nothing differently.

According to our sample of free-riders' the key to reducing free-riding, above all else, is communication. Though coordination and communication are different aspects of teamwork, when our study participants talked about "communication", they also touched upon "coordination." Indeed, coordination mechanisms can encourage and facilitate communication, just as communication can improve coordination, including time management, scheduling, expectation setting, and the like (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001),

Virtually all respondents pointed out the lack of communication as a factor that contributed to free-riding, and noted that improved communication can be a solution to the problem. Many respondents saw communication as a foundation or pre-courser to effective leadership and performance, and a lack of communication to be a root cause for most problems in teams.

While we can help facilitate communication through designing a well-rounded platform within X-Culture, as one respondent suggested: "*X-Culture should have an online portal through which people will have to communicate through video conferencing and not through WhatsApp or Facebook messages. That way, the entire conversation will be official and transparent*" we can only improve situations to the extent that we understand the fundamental reasons for free-riding on GVTs. Facilitating coordination is also mentioned as a major solution to the free-riding problem. By definition, coordination is the set of tasks and processes by which teams of actors carrying out activities manage interdependencies, in order for them to perform effectively as a team (Ocker, Hiltz, Turoff, & Fjermestad, 1995). As some respondents suggested that "*We need a moderator after the first or the second meeting*", "*Try to assign tasks for every person*" and that "*Force everybody to have set roles right from the get go, so everybody knows what to do*", free-riding may be prevented by having strong leadership and assigning roles and responsibilities.

## Implications for Identifying and Preventing Free-Riding on GVTs

Our study provided qualitative results of the analysis of accounts of free-riders on GVTs that took part in an international business consulting project. These qualitative responses that came "straight from the horse's mouth" – that is from the free-riders themselves– offer a new perspective at the problem of free-riding in GVTs. In this section, we summarize our findings and develop theoretical propositions for future empirical testing.

***Timing — first days of team life are critical.*** Free-riding tends to take root in the early stage of the team life. It appears most frequently due to problems with initial contacts and interactions. We could not find prior literature that had looked at the temporal effects and timing in the context of free-riding, but the literature on the role of initiation in teams is, albeit indirectly, relevant here (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Seltzer & Bass, 1990). If the team survives the initial stage intact, free-riding is much less likely to occur later. Leadership and training are very important at the team member selection stages, as well as at the beginning of the project. Thus, we propose that:

***Proposition 1*:** In global virtual teams, free-riding is most likely to begin in the early stage of the team life.

***Coordination is the key.*** If we were to provide one best recommendation for dealing with the free-riding problem in global virtual teams, it would be facilitating coordination. As we previously defined, coordination is the set of tasks and processes by which actors carry out activities to manage interdependencies and, thus, perform effectively as a team (Ocker *et al.*, 1995). Although coordination is crucial for all teams, it is of particular importance to GVTs where the need to coordinate the temporal patterns of team behavior is strong (Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & Hung,

2003). In face-to-face teams, team interaction is a process wherein verbal and nonverbal cues help regulate the flow of communication, provide immediate feedback, and convey subtle meanings. However, in GVTs, the conveyance of cues is hindered, feedback is delayed, and there are often long pauses in communication (Massey *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, GVTs must be able to temporally coordinate their interactions to ensure effective communication and flow of information. Research has suggested that temporal coordination, including setting deadlines, aligning the pace of effort among members (synchronization), and specifying time spent on specific tasks, reduce the uncertainty associated with team tasks (McGrath, 1991; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001). Without temporal coordination, particularly in our case without an initial meeting when all team members can discuss their own schedules, make sure they can work together or in sequence at an agreed pace, divide tasks while estimating necessary time to complete the tasks, some team members who are not proactive in performing or who have poor time management skills may feel lost or overwhelmed, and thus engage in free-riding.

***Proposition 2*:** In global virtual teams, poor temporal coordination is positively related to free-riding.

Through improving team coordination processes, team leaders play an influential role in ensuring team performance (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). It is known that the virtual communication pattern inherent to GVTs has presented great challenges for information use and exchanges among team members, making free-riding more likely. To overcome these challenges, we concur with Lacerenza *et al.* (2015) and suggest that facilitative leaders, be they formal or informal, are crucial to GVT effectiveness and preventing free-riding. Zaccaro *et al.* (2001) proposed that strong team leadership, where leaders can match individual member capabilities to role requirement, offer clear performance goals, and monitor and provide feedback on the accomplishment of these goals, results in better coordination among team members. It can be expected that a lack of leadership, where team members are not clear of what to do and what they can do, and where no monitoring or instant feedback within the team is available, tends to cause individual members to withdraw their effort. It is also important to make it clear who should do what, that is, establishing the roles and responsibilities of each team member as soon as possible (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2015).

***Proposition 3*:** In global virtual teams, a lack of leadership relates to a greater likelihood of free-riding.

***Free riders do not always start with an intention to free-ride.*** Although the exploitive intentions are more or less implied in the definition of free riding (Delton, Cosmides, Guemo, Robertson, & Tooby, 2012), our analysis of the responses from those who denied free riding shows that some may have decided to withdraw effort after unpleasant initial contact. These individuals claimed how active they were in the beginning to reach out to the team while receiving little feedback, or how surprising they were to find out that their contribution was excluded in the first milestone deliverables. Thus, they lost motivation and did not know how to contribute further. In these case scenarios, assigning roles and responsibilities to team members in the early stage and ensuring fair procedures and interactions in decision making can be critical. We have provided a short overview of the factors that had been discussed in the literature as possible reasons for free-riding, such as perceptions of (in)justice, identifiability of individual effort and contribution to team cause, role ambiguity, coordination problems, and the like. Although the interviews with free-riders did not allow us to obtain definitive answers with respect to the comparative effect of each factor, we can conclude that it is likely the external factors, rather than personality flaws, play the major role. People free-ride not because they are inherently flawed, but, at least partially, because unfavorable circumstances and problems with team dynamics make contributing to team efforts harder. We deliberately state this proposition in general terms. Research in this area is likely to be very fruitful. Thus, we propose that:

***Proposition 4*:** Free-riding is more likely to occur as a result of factors related to work design and team dynamics than as a result of the personality flaws of the team members.

***Positive responses despite negative experience.*** Despite their unsatisfactory performance, most free-riders remain positive about the project and their team. Hence, problems of this nature do not necessarily mean the free-rider is lost to the organization. Free riders appear to remain committed to the organization and their co-workers. Additionally, once identified and warned, free riders are likely to change their behavior. However, our interviews were conducted only after the project was completed, so it is hard to make comparisons and any causal inferences are impossible. That said, given another chance they would likely do better. Thus, we propose that:

***Proposition 5*:** Free-riders feel conflict with their teams, but not with their organizations.

***Communication is the key.*** If we were to provide one best recommendation for dealing with the problem, it would be better initial intrateam communication. Based on our interviews with the free-riders, it appears most free-riders are not lazy irresponsible people. Under different circumstances, most would have turned out to be productive members of the teams. However, due to a lack of communication, they failed to get involved, or later failed to resolve a conflict or figure out what should be done. Better communication could preclude or resolve most of the problems surrounding free-riding.

***Proposition 6a*:** As quality and frequency of communication increases, the likelihood of free-riding behavior decreases. ***Proposition 6b*:** Availability of tools and channels for convenient, open, and frequent communication decreases the likelihood of free-riding.

## *Team member diversity*

Although our interview questions did not specifically ask about cultural differences, several respondents mentioned them as contributing to free-riding. Six respondents (7.8%) specifically mentioned "*cultural differences*" hampering interactions among team members. Others talked about issues arising from the fact that the team members come from different cultures and countries (*e.g.*, language barriers, biases and prejudice against other cultures, differences in values and norms). For example, one team member noted, "*we all spoke English, but some were not very fluent. Language differences were still a barrier. It was hard to discuss issues in sufficient detail.*"

Other comments dealt with differences in traditions and traditions in different countries and how that affected team dynamics. As one respondent noted when providing reasons for his difficulties in establishing a relationship with his team, "*Actually, I'm doing an exchange program in India, and we have a huge period of vacation of 3 weeks ⋯ I told [my team] that I won't be able to work during three weeks because I will be traveling and I won't have laptop or internet connection, but it still did not work well.*"

It appears that culture affects team dynamics in general and free-riding in particular in overt and covert ways. Some facets of the problem are immediately visible, but some are not. What team members may have not noticed, but what research into the effect of culture in teams has shown, is that cultural differences often play out in covert, yet important ways. The effects of culture in GVTs can be explained by the *similarity-attraction theory*, which postulates that people tend to be attracted to and enjoy interacting with those who are similar and therefore familiar to them (Williams & O'Reilly III, 1998). Therefore, homogeneity facilitates and diversity hurts team integration and cohesion (Watson & Kumar, 1992). In diverse teams, team members have less in common, trust less, feel less connected, and are less likely to develop the sense of social reciprocal obligation that prevents free-riding (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Katsikeas *et al.*, 2009; also see Boiney, 2001).

Furthermore, social cues and communication patterns differ across cultures making misunderstandings likely. A genuine effort to contribute to the team and the desire to connect may go unnoticed due to misinterpretation of the signals due to cultural or demographic differences (Barna, 1994; Maznevski, 1994; Shaw & Barrett-Power,

1998; Wlotko & Federmeier, 2012). Such challenges are, of course, only exacerbated by low-context communication channels, which further limits opportunities for effective social exchange (Hambley *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b).

***Proposition 7*:** As team diversity increases, probability of free-riding behavior increases.

## Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine the phenomenon of free-riding in GVTs through the eyes of the people identified as free-riders by their team members. By analyzing comments provided by 77 members of global virtual teams who put in so little effort that their teams excluded them, we obtained a glimpse of the phenomenon as seen and interpreted by the free-riders themselves, and not, as it is usually done, by their more productive team members or team managers. The two camps have very different perspectives. Based on the analysis of the responses provided by the free-riders, the following theoretical and practical implications can be derived.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

First, even when confronted with solid evidence, team members with a documented record of free-riding tend to, at least initially, deny failure to contribute. Even when they admit to a lack of contribution, they tend to blame circumstances or their team members and almost never accepted their own responsibility. It is important to keep this in mind when dealing with the problem. Confronting or shaming free-riders will likely only lead to an escalation of confrontation and each side trying to blame the other.

Second, the problem generally starts in the early stages of team development. The first days of the project are critical in developing healthy team norms and building trust. Team orientations, meet-and-greet sessions, team building activities and other forms of training and development in the early stages of the team life are likely to reduce chances of free-riding later. At the very least, the team dynamics needs to be closely monitored and help provided at the first sign of trouble.

Third, free-riders tend to provide multiple reasons, usually two or more, often unrelated reasons for their lack of effort. The good news is that most of them are easily identifiable and preventable. For example, almost half of the free-riders cited the lack of coordination (48.1%) or poor communication (37.7 %) among team members as the most frequent reasons. A proper work design and management system, and even a little intervention, such as mandatory regular live online meetings among team members, can dramatically improve team coordination and communication, thereby reducing free-riding.

Fourth, our finding that free-riders' explanations varied according to *when* the free riding occurred suggest that optimal strategies for mitigating it also change over the life cycle of teams. Free-riding that occurs in the early stages of the team life appears to be due to a lack of coordination and communication. Thus, the intervention would usually call for a clearer definition of the roles of the team members, scheduling improvements, use of more media-rich communication channels, and the like. When free-riding happens in the later stages of the team life, in contrast, it is more likely to be due to an interpersonal conflict or personal circumstances and thus resolved through team counseling and conflict resolution.

Lastly, cultural differences were found to contribute to the problem. Although almost never identified directly, culture seems to play a role. Differences in cultural values, language barriers, and world views lead to less attraction among team members, and make communication more difficult and less enjoyable, which in turn reduces attraction

among team members and hinders development of trust and the sense of reciprocal social obligations and ties. This then further reduces communication and adversely affects coordination, increases the chance of conflict, and leads to an escalation of the problem. Cross-cultural training and more attention to promoting communication and interaction among the team members can alleviate the problem.

## Limitations and Qualifications

Though we feel confident about the foregoing implications, we must also acknowledge salient empirical limitations related to our sample that qualify them. First, our topic combined with the purely self-report nature of our data make the potential for self-serving and self-presentation biases in the responses we received very real. Indeed, this potential seemed to be realized in the minority of participants who owned up to free riding. Nevertheless, most ultimately admitted it, albeit indirectly.

Second, we have drawn from an exclusively student population. Though it would be optimal to follow this study with a parallel one that drew from a working-adult population, the feasibility of obtaining such a sample is unfortunately low for reasons already mentioned. Considering these apparently systematic constraints and the reasonably high stakes of the X-Culture projects from which we drew, we feel that this limitation is more than acceptable. Of course, we hope that continued research or changes in the current research climate make overcoming these limitations more feasible in the future.

## Conclusion

In closing, we must reiterate that the present study is exploratory in its nature. Our goal was provided a new look at the phenomenon of free-riding in global virtual teams rather than provide definitive answers or estimate the precise effect sizes. Based on our analysis, we have provided a set of propositions that we hope illuminate opportunities for future research and suggestions for free-riding interventions. We hope both ultimately lead to an overall decrease in free riding on GVTs as well as traditional teams.

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