Information Technology and Global I-O Psychology:  
International Online Forums

Santiago Demtschenko  
Deutsche Bank

Robert G. Jones  
Southwest Missouri State University

In a recent issue of *TIP*, Griffin and Kabanoff (2002) identified several barriers to international collaboration and some excellent ideas for overcoming these. We read this with great interest, as we had embarked on a quest to find out what people were doing online to span the barriers of time and distance. Before the eruption of New Information Technologies (NIT) the distances between I-O practitioners, scientists, and students around the world were more real. For many years, cross-cultural exchanges were either too expensive or too slow and in some cases simply not possible at all. For many people internationally, it was not easy to attend I-O meetings and congresses or to have access to relevant information; therefore, global exchange was rare.

Certainly, NIT has had a positive impact on the development of our science and profession all over the world. In the past, the ability of I-O psychologists to investigate, compare, and share knowledge and experiences within nations and regions has benefited us, both through learning from each other, and also, perhaps, from the more homogeneous growth of our field. Now, however, we can communicate and cooperate more readily with colleagues and organizations from other countries and regions. Awareness of the global I-O community can show us similarities and differences in the issues we face and the range of possible solutions available. Expanding the use of NIT to support new channels for cross-cultural interchanges seems like a valuable next step.

Obviously, there are many ways to make this happen. A starting point is to ask the question of how NIT has been used in I-O to this point. This is certainly a broad topic, but the intention here is to open the topic of online international forums for discussion. In general terms, we could define online forums as accessible virtual places where I-O psychologists can meet with peers and discuss scientific and professional themes or become informed by reading the contents and following the dynamics of such dialogues.

In order to investigate I-O online forums, we approached six North American SIOP members (Joy Hazucha, Paul Chan, Ted Hayes, Ron Riggio, Irene Sasaki, and Peg Stockdale) and members from Asia (David Chan), Europe (Marise Born and Handan Sinangil), and South America (Abel Gallardo Alcay and Jaime Moreno Villegas). We spoke to these particular people because, in most cases, they have significant international involve-
ments, either through their work or their research areas. We asked our respondents to answer the following questions:

1. Do you know about the existence of any I-O international online forums for discussion? At what level have you been involved, and what has your experience been? What are some prominent topics that have been discussed?

2. If you have never heard of I-O online forums: Would you like to participate in one? What topics would you like to discuss? Who would you suggest to organize such a forum?

3. How might such an interchange affect the development of I-O psychology globally?

4. How could I-O international online forums be promoted?

5. Do you know other similar types of online interchanges?

Responses

In response to the first, only two North American respondents were aware of international online discussion forums, while four of our international respondents were familiar with such forums. The forums used included piopnet, mnet, emonet, orgcult, hrnet, delphy forums, and the Academy of Management gender and diversity in organizations division electronic mailing list. Those who knew of these forums were either active participants or had just visited the sites.

In general, forum users said that they have had good experiences with them, but that there are problems. Useful information, advice, opportunities to get to know colleagues, and developing networks were all positive consequences of being involved. Problems mentioned included different educational levels and expectations of the participants, time constraints (“I don’t have time to read and respond to lengthy opinions on a daily basis”), and domination by a few contributors. Our respondents saw the forums as being dominated by U.S. participants and classical I-O topics (e.g., training, selection interviews, quality processes, OD, methodology and assessment).

All respondents who had never been involved in an international I-O forum said they would like to participate. Global assignments, performance management, psychological tests in selection, and succession planning were among the topics of interest.

It was suggested in this question and in question four that SIOP organize such an online forum and that it be promoted in several ways, including publicity during conferences and congresses, promotion in TIP, through national and regional psychological associations, e-mails to I-O psychologists with information on the forums and a request to “spread the word,” I-O related Web pages, and informally.
In response to our third question, respondents were quite eloquent in expressing the potential benefits of international I-O online forums. The gist of these was that such a forum would create the opportunity to open a fast and efficient exchange of ideas and networking. Here are some quotes:

“Many researchers, especially those from less-developed countries and smaller universities, don’t get to attend conferences regularly. The forum will be an excellent platform for them to contribute their ideas and also benefit from researchers in other countries.”

“You may know the work of other people who are doing interesting things in this area that otherwise you would not have known.”

“As for international issues, it would be helpful to get a better understanding of what scholars and practitioners are doing around the world, and to build connections with them.”

Other potential benefits included improving understanding of global issues, facilitating cross-cultural I-O research, and international validation of methods and techniques.

A Moderator’s View

We asked Neal Ashkanasy (University of Queensland, Australia) to share his experiences as a moderator of two successful electronic mailing lists: (a) The Organizational Culture Caucus (orgcult), orgcult@list.gsm.uq.edu.au and (b) The Emotions in Organizations Group (emonet), emonet@gsm.list.uq.edu.au. Both are selective subscriber lists. Orgcult has 334 members from 23 countries. Emonet has 330 members representing 21 countries. Slightly over half the subscribers to both orgcult and emonet are U.S. based. Neal reports that issues of an international or cross-cultural nature are discussed in both forums, but especially in the Organizational Culture Caucus.

Neal also commented that, while there may not be a need for a separate online forum for international SIOP associates and members, he does think that we can do more as a society to promote international involvement. “I was a member of SIOP’s International Affairs Subcommittee, [which]...seems to have faded from view since 1999.” He suggested we create an international tab on the SIOP Web site and have a look at the ways that some of our related organizations (APA, APS, Academy) have (and have not) successfully promoted international involvement.

Some Ideas for Effective International Forums

The structure and content of I-O international online forums can make them more effective and possibly avoid the problems mentioned by our respondents. We can think about some structural features that may be effective (a) to avoid problems related to different educational levels, participants can be previously selected (e.g. indicating the target group, using a specific
registration process, etc.; (b) to better meet the expectations of participants, goals and an agenda for the discussion can be communicated before starting the exchange; (c) to avoid domination in the discussion, the forum can include a moderator; (d) to facilitate the communication of the group’s results, the outcomes of online discussions can be summed up and published, which would also be a solution for problems of time constraints; (e) to promote participant interest and involvement, the forum can deliberately involve important researchers and practitioners. Guiding discussion content may best be accomplished by changing forum topics as needs arise for collaboration or to work out local and global issues in the field. These structure and content features come from choices that need to be made when a forum is being planned, because the forum may take any of several forms. These are much the same sorts of decisions made by conference organizers regarding the structure and content of conference sessions.

Conclusions

As you can see, we got some support for the notion of I-O international forums from the people we talked with. This may not be enough data to dedicate resources yet, but there appears to be some interest, especially among those outside North America, for either establishing new forums or better promoting existing ones as a professional society. Perhaps if we can involve national and regional psychological associations in the organization of the forums (e.g. promotion, definition of the topics to be discussed, etc.), we can broaden our reach in more ways than just geographically, as well.

References