A New Reality for Engineers: Global Work Teams
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Billions of dollars are lost annually when joint ventures fail due to cultural misunderstandings. In its report “Making Change Work,” IBM Global Business Services estimates that 59% of projects miss at least one major objective or fail entirely. The “Grand Challenges,” as outlined by the National Academy of Engineering, will not be solved by one country, or one culture, or one genius. What do these all have in common? They all are impacted by the new sociology of work known as Global Work Teams.

A global economy requires that people work in distributed teams - across time, distance and culture. There are many advantages to these work environments: cost savings; access to new resources and a global talent pool; increased creativity and enhanced decision making; improved understanding of local markets and needs. But the reality of Global Work Teams often falls short because of the many challenges that they face: cultural misunderstandings; misuse of virtual communication approaches; old style leadership approaches; logistical snafus; language and time zone challenges, etc. Webs of technology link us together, but how effective are engineers in navigating this terrain that often results in cultural misunderstandings? How effective are they in harnessing the creative potential of diverse perspectives? Experience has shown that many global teams fail to reach their potential, not because they lack the necessary technical knowledge, but because they are not prepared with the insights and knowledge that would promote productive interactions.

In preparing our engineers we focus on development of their critical technical knowledge. But in many ways we may be failing to address the workplace environment which they now face. There are real “hard” skills and competencies that can be addressed to support engineers in working effectively across cultures; in using collaboration technologies to support communication; in designing effective virtual meetings; in using International English; in establishing predictable communication patterns, in building trust in virtual environments; and in understanding their own cross-cultural style and how this impacts their work.

In this presentation, the author will challenge the audience to consider if their education programs are adequately preparing engineers for this new reality. She will share examples of what some universities and companies are doing to address this; provide a glimpse into the kind of content that is now available; and suggest a model for preparing engineers for Global Work Teams.