

## THE DIMENSION OF TRUST IN A VIRTUAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Renata Relja\*  
Gorana Bandalović\*\*

Received: 15. 9. 2008  
Accepted: 6. 10. 2008

Review  
UDC 65.01

*The new forms of work within the network society are the consequence of informatical progress which has the effect in replacement of traditional ways of working by the modern ones. New forms are primarily characterized by transferring the work into the network and its organization within the virtual organizations and teams. Liberation from both temporal and spatial obstacles provides us with a whole set of advantages which appear during making outlines for new form of work. The former has facilitated and accelerated the forming of the team that is both exquisite and flexible. The dimension of trust, as a significant structural and socio-psychological category of a traditional work forms, is also a key to social relations within the network society. We speak of efficacious 'social glue', which is, even in newly arisen virtual socio-economic configurations, crucial to their successful functioning and progress.*

*«Virtuality requires trust to make it work:  
Technology on its own is not enough»  
(Pantelli, 2005)*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Castells refers to the new economy, which has arisen on a global level in the last two decades, as the informational and global. Informational, for the productiveness and competitiveness of variables in a new form of economy

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\* Renata Relja, PhD., Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Sociology, Sinjska 2, 21000 Split, Phone: +385(0)21329287, E-mail: [rrelja@ffst.hr](mailto:rrelja@ffst.hr)

\*\* Gorana Bandalović, assistant, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Sociology, Sinjska 2, 21000 Split, Phone: +385(0)21329289, E-mail: [gbandalo@ffst.hr](mailto:gbandalo@ffst.hr)

depend on their efficient creation ability, analysis and application of information based on knowledge. Global, for the core of the production, consumption and circulation is organized on a global level. The new economy was developed in the last quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of information revolution that created an essential material basis to that form of a new economy (Castells, 2000). Information economy brings to new organizational logic development, and therefore the emergence of information economy happens inside of different socio-cultural contexts which results in creating new multicultural referential frame. All of this is happening under the aegis of cultural globalization that represents encounter of different world customs and cultures. Free flow of goods, capital and men include an evolution of habits, customs and cultures. Forming of the new social interaction patterns goes along with the information economy development. The emergence of virtual communities based on on-line communication is interpreted as a peak of a historical process that dealt with separating location from sociability during the shaping of a community. Therefore, interactions connected with territoriality are being replaced by 'new' selective social relations patterns (Castells, 2003).

The post-industrial society within which the major part of these phenomena are happening does not represent unambiguous exploitation of the existing trends. On the contrary, it is the completely new aspect of social and technological organization and a new way of life. New principles cause important movements in crucial concepts of doing business, and they refer to time, space and market dimension, strategic resources, the role of work, the importance of transport, communication, as well as social and organizational order. However, the technological progress does not always follow the new principles, nor this progress is always followed by appropriate academic theories. In that context, not only the importance of understanding the present is stressed out, but also the predicting of the future, for the future is considered a key to development and prosperity. The establishment of modern telecommunication infrastructures, for most countries of the world, presents the crucial moment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economic success. Furthermore, communication networks have become cheaper and more efficient, and therefore cause giant leap towards decentralization. Nowadays, being a part of a certain social surroundings, so called 'districts of power', is not required anymore. By means of electronics, doing business is both cheap and rapid (Bell, 2001).

The transformation of a traditional work forms occurs within the indicated processes, but the predictions that networking would lead to cutting down the workforce did not come true. Quite the contrary, there is an increase in

openings, especially in informational systems. The result of the changes indicated is seen primarily in the altered profession structure. In the most developed countries, more than half of the overall employees are found to be doing jobs concerning informational activities (Garača, 2004). The trends inspired by competition and lead by technology are in the background of a momentarily employment transformation. Therefore, the quickest growing work categories are temporary work, periodical work, flexible work and the employment instability (Castells, 2000; Carnoy/Castells, 2001; Šporer 2004). In that way, the technology is getting a very significant role in creating possibilities for individuals, who then become the workers of knowledge and are enabled to work at any place, at any time and at any position. Telework is becoming an alternative way of work organization that includes a complete or partial usage of information and communication technologies (ICT). These employees are allowed to access all working activities from the remote places (Pérez Pérez et al., 2002).

Telework integrates the two sources of the competitor's advantages – the company's own personnel and new information and communication technologies. E-work is becoming more productive in many cases, even in communicational-intensive assignments (Pérez Pérez et al., 2002). Anyway, the extensive mobility of goods, images, ideas, money and people appeared as a consequence of these new circumstances, and it represents one of the most important characteristics of work and society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hadrill/Green, 2003). Thanks to the occurrence of the before mentioned, many of Handy's predictions, written in his book *The Future of Work* published in 1984, came true. He had set the basis for the 'portfolio workers' and new 'knowledge economy' by predicting the collapse of a traditional forms of working. Worker's and manual skills changed places with knowledge as the basis for new business and new work. Hierarchies and bureaucracies now must step back in front of 'networks' and 'partnerships' (Handy, 1984).

As the consequence, at the trace of global transformations within the area of a traditional work forms caused by technological changes, new work forms are created within the network society. But, the basic work concept, which is primarily based on the establishment of trust, equally exists in new virtual organizations and virtual teams as their basic elements. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to show how, no matter the newly arisen work forms, one of the basic factors of a successful work process depends on a high trust degree establishment between the members in these new configurations just as in a traditional work forms. The goals are dealing with the recapitulation of the key empiric and theoretical results within this area, and the primary stress is put on

socio-psychological aspect of the dimension of trust. By means of this study, the importance of interdisciplinary approach to this complex phenomenon, such as the establishment of trust within the virtual work society is, wants to be shown.

Starting point in the article is the concept of the virtual organization and virtual teams as main institutional subjects within the virtual working environment, their advantages and disadvantages. The major disadvantage within the communication process is shown, a lack of face-to-face segment, which can cause obstacles in the area of trust establishment. Trust, as a basic socio-psychological aspect of every interaction relation, is an imperative factor within the virtual environment. Within that context many theories about a swift trust establishment have been set, about how to compress time required to generate trust in virtual environment, and which, in its quality, has to be equivalent to the 'quantity' of trust within the traditional working environment.

## **2. WORKING IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT – VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION AND VIRTUAL TEAMS**

Virtual space provides almost limitless possibilities. Institutional subject forms exist within it; so called virtual organizations that represent highly progressive types of cluster composed, concrete and geographically dispersed members: firms, companies or corporations connected by Internet. These virtual organizations are fundamentally different regarding the traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century organizations (Kasparova, 2006). The virtual organization as a new organizational paradigm is a result of a dominant theory and practice of the innovative companies of information-computational technology. Its concept is shaped regarding the idea of virtuality, it presents unconventional social configuration whose structures and functions depend on a computer-based technology. The before mentioned configuration is different from the conventional one by means of both spatial and temporal obstacles liberation (Jaeger Čaldarović, 2002). Apart from the fact that there are no fixed barriers, clear leadership, production centre, and connection between companies, suppliers and buyers; this organization continues to change. Two dimensions are affected by constant changes; the responsibility and the authority one, Therefore, the virtual organization, unlike the bureaucratic one, is more similar to the living organism. Within the virtual space, many organizations combine the basic strategy with the other companies' strategies, and in that way they increase the market share value, sales, profit, competitiveness, the rate of growth and the value of a product itself (Mowshowitz, 2002; Camarinha-Matos et al., 2005). Therefore, the virtual company represents the new organizational

model that uses technology with a goal to connect people, means and ideas in a dynamic way. «'Virtual' organisational arrangements consist of networks of workers and organisational units, linked by information and communication technologies (ICT), which will flexibly co-ordinate their activities, combine their skills and resources in order to achieve common goals but without very much by way of traditional hierarchical modes of central direction or supervision. Such arrangements will form and reform as problems arise so providing a flexibility of response to changing circumstances and organisational needs» (Hughes et al., 2003).

When we speak of virtual organizations, at the same time we speak of virtual teams as their basic components. In the concept of virtual work, special attention is paid to forming the virtual teams who represent the new way of work formation inside the network. Flexibility, geographical dispersion of the members, possibility to do the work at any time and at any place enabled gathering the experts from all over the world within a single team with a goal to do a project that is exclusively temporary in nature (Hughes et al., 2001). Unlike the teams which are focused on 'face-to-face' interaction, virtual teams, whose members have not had the chance to meet at all, stress out the importance of the efficient communication model development with the purpose of achieving a common goal. By using long distance communication networks, videoconference or an e-mail, the successful cooperation is possible whether the team members are in the next room or at the other continent. The researches on the efficiency and specific quality of virtual team's work could be summarized within a few key frames of reference (Gould, 2000): *virtual teams do get the job done* – most of the teams reach the desired goals, but in cases where the goal was not reached, failure was not co-related to virtuality; *not many teams are 100 % virtual* – virtual teams sometimes aspire to 'face-to-face' contact; *virtual teams do have the same structure as the normal teams*; *rewording and success recognition of a team members is necessary*; *all members must be informed*, and likewise, all team members must inform each other; *the progress towards the goals must be visible*; *the team building, conflict solving*, and finally, *the people in the virtual surroundings can be trusted*.

Thanks to the technological support, individuals who may have never met can be a part of a several teams existing on different geographical locations. Their work can be done within the different time zones, through the internal business unites and different cultures (Lipnack/Stamps, 2000; Orlikowski, 2002). But as a communication is imposed as an important link equally to both classic-form work team and the virtual one, researches have shown that teams using computer mediated communication system (CMCS) do not communicate

as efficiently as those who have face-to-face communication. Insufficiency of a face-to-face contact and inexistence of non-verbal communication (Wilson, 2003) had resulted in socio-technical systems development that support and improve computer governed team members' activities. In that way, the communication and coordination of the team members is facilitated by technologies which are characterized by three continuums: time, space and the group support degree; which is manifested within a specifically created cultural pattern (Fisher/Fisher, 2001). Therefore, the most important goal of using that kind of communication is encouraging interaction and inclusion, which are directly connected to the feeling of belonging to a certain society.

From the sociological point of view, virtuality results in a lower level of the individual affiliation, in excessive workloads, the ambiguity of the role and absenteeism (O'Hara-Deveraux/Johansen, 1994). Because of the lack and deprivation of a basic human relations and interactions of the members within a network, the importance of gaining trust as a crucial element for the successful functioning in the virtual surroundings is pointed out.

### **3. TRUST AS SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT**

Sociologists Weber, Durkheim and Simmel define modernization as a process of a growing rationalization followed by the disappearance of traditional social bonds. Abstract social relations replace them now (Bornschiefer/Volken, 2005). Within that context, the transformation of the category of trust is also followed. Weber finds a term of trust a very significant in an area of economic life, and believes that its origin is in religious costumes (Weber, 1989).

In order to actualize the cooperation with strangers we are connected to in everyday situations, the trust is an imperative. It is a key factor to all the changes, for it builds expectations and lowers potential risks and indistinctness. Inasmuch as the former experience can be transferred into the future, we face the increase of the new initiatives and widening the domain of actions to come, and therefore our future actions are determined by trust. The profits, as well as the losses, are estimated better when and if we have gained trust (Bornschiefer/Volken, 2005). Fukuyama thinks of trust as a social capital that is a crucial element to a common prosperity achievement. In the process, the author analyses the social values that affect the global behaviour of an economic subjects. The trust justifies and makes an activity of an individual meaningful, stimulates creativity and acts as social glue. Trust is therefore a key element of

an economic structure analysis, and it explains why the societies develop in different directions (Fukuyama, 2000).

By developing a theoretical perspective about changes that occur in a modern world, Giddens indicates that today we are living in an uncontrolled world, the world that is running amok, and is characterized by risks and insecurity. Parallel with the risk, he sets before us the term of trust that is connected to safety we feel about other individuals or institutions. Traditional forms of trust are disappearing, and nowadays, in the global village we are living in, the term of trust is closely linked to 'abstract systems'; such as bankers' system efficiency, for example. In that way, Giddens (2007) has managed to connect the term of trust to the term of risk. Trust is, therefore, a state of a positive, reliable and subjective expectation that is referred to someone's behaviour in a situation with a certain risk possibility. It is all about a dynamic and important social relation that becomes a participant of a mutual activity and is specified by a situation itself (Gundry, 2000).

Learning and the socialization processes primarily shape the trust. Therefore, if most of the people within the social environment are reliable and trustworthy and most of their interactions have resulted in a positive outcome; it is very likely that actions like that would lead individuals into regaining the faith in trust. If most of the individuals live through an experience such as the one formerly described, the trust has a good predispositions to spread far and wide. Bornschieer and Volken show the tendency of using the term 'the culture of trust' in order to describe sympathy towards the trust within the social context. Generally accepted culture of trust is found where the most of the participants are trustworthy (Bornschieer/Volken, 2005). By comparing multiple empirical studies, Bornschieer and Volken came to conclusion that trust not only helps economic growth acceleration, but it is also an efficient means of social change and therefore it does not make the resource which are related to the individuals only.

From the beginning of 1990's the concept of social capital and one of its specific forms – trust represents a special domain of interest within the research community. Within the social economy, the stress has been put on the trust dimension investigation as a potential foreseer of an economic efficiency based on conventional growth factors. The researches have indicated that the trust is a complex multiple dimension construct which can be highly correlated to innovative actions (Volken, 2002).

The trust is of a key importance to diffusion of a new technological style in a knowledge society. It enables companies an entry into a virtual surroundings, so called cooperative networks system, which is recognized as an efficient and effective channel for the flow of information and new ideas. The trust significantly reduces control and monitoring and by means of that, they make this system accessible and more productive (Volken, 2002). From the sociological point of view, trust can be treated as a means of social integration and social cohesion that indicates the level of connection to other group members.

The dimension of trust could be observed within the rational and moral trust dimensions. In a *rational trust* dimension situation, the participants behave rationally to an extent of their awareness of the profit and privileges to come during the estimation whether to believe or not. The rational trust could be interpreted as a reflexion of a minimal trust situation. This kind of trust is based on a rational cost-benefit calculation. The *moral trust* includes norms, values and attitudes, and it stands for the forms of common orientations that are culturally transmitted within the socialization and enculturation processes, and are relatively stabile in time. The society reaches the maximum trust level inasmuch the social practice that is in charge of ratification maintains the common moral cooperative ethos.

Volken (2000) connects two different kinds of expectation in his heuristic model: experience (rational trust) and moral (moral trust) as two specific objects. While on the personal level the generalized trust makes social interaction more inclusive, the system enables the participant to learn to trust each other, for the trust within the system is stabilized through the experience.

Herzog (2001) has come to conclusion that the main factors that affect the level of trust are self-estimation of examinees themselves, the estimation of others, and estimation of processes and activities. This widens the theoreticians' believes who exclusively stressed out the importance of relation between the team members during the study of trust. Therefore, the dimension of trust, which was the basic unit of traditional work forms, remains the key to a business success. Research is only transferred into new spatial and temporal work surroundings dimension, whose characteristics are modified as the outcome of a modern technological progress.



#### **4. GAINING OF TRUST IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT – IN VIRTUAL ORGANIZATIONS AND TEAMS**

The trust is an important factor of every social relation, so it is of crucial importance in a business world where companies have to rely on their business partners. Therefore, the model of trust between the organizations and the members of team imposes itself as the major factor of a successful partnership. The question raised is directed to the modelling of virtual working environment within which the virtual work forms would be as efficient as possible. The teamwork is based on and is the result of a cooperation that implies information, knowledge and experience exchange. Unless we do not trust other people, we are not ready to cooperate, and we are brought to conclusion that the trust is a key to working in a virtual environment, virtual organizations and teams.

The team members are most likely to belong to the different cultures and to live in different parts of a world. One of the challenges that is set upon the team managers of the multicultural teams is creating an atmosphere that is based on friendship, good relations, mutual respect, efficient communication and productivity despite the obvious disproportion existence that came as a result of their different cultures. The team leader has to accept all the existing cultural differences of every team member and tend to create a new culture with the best characteristics of every single team member (Brown et al., 2007). A step towards the trust establishment leads across 'the agreement' and overcoming the socio-cultural differences of a certain team members. Rules and expectations have to be set at the very beginning, for the norms and values are different in different cultures, so the possible misunderstandings could be avoided. The dimension of trust is an important link in gaining trust, for only the team members who can express freely their task expectations can become a successful team members. Interaction and communication encouragement as well as the anticipation of the communication to be, result in a better interactions between the team members who will then be more loyal and will reach a higher level of mutual trust (Jarvenpaa/Leidner, 1998; Eggert, 2001).

Be as it may, trust based on the virtual environment can be tottered by claims of the Internet criticses. They state that Internet development leads towards social isolation; social communication and family life breakdown, for the individuals have come to terms with virtual communication and have abandoned face-to-face communication (Castells, 2003). No matter the fact that the real operational unit is becoming a business project done by network instead of a single company or a group of companies (Castells, 2000), the project is still realized by individuals dispersed in a network, and therefore the concept of trust

is an important factor which is to connect them in that newly arisen environment. Trust is crucial during the information exchange between the people working in social, political or economic activities (Borneshier/Volken, 2005), but it also defines the connection between the formal and corporative ethic codes, as well as the employees' personal ethics. Generally speaking, managers believe that the employees' ethic standard is at a very high level, and therefore the violation of the company's code is prevented (Pierce/Henry, 1996).

Gaining of trust, therefore, is not simple and rapid process, especially in virtual environment where it is additionally made even more difficult by different cultural differences and precariousness (Hinds/Weisband, 2003). The dimension of trust in virtual working environment is primarily connected to occasionally repeated patterns of interpersonal exchange. Between the associates, the trust primarily depends on the timing, strategic risk level and the strength of interpersonal bonds. The team members who show the highest trust rate are social, they show interest to other members' attitudes, they are not afraid of taking the initiative and they are looking for feedback. The team members with the lowest trust rate do not obtain a high level of social participation. Their communication is merely occasional and it consists of completing their tasks. For this reason, the employees are trained to learn to trust the others, to create the mutual trust, to attach themselves to each other, and to recognise potential obstacles to their goals in an atypical organization in which the members are separated by both time and space.

The first step in gaining trust is creating a *successful communication*, for only by means of communication we are capable to find out and understand other peoples' priorities. But the communication itself is not enough in gaining trust in virtual teams and organizations. In order to get the complete image it is necessary to define the construct of trust. It consists of two components. The first component is *predictability*. The word 'trust' is normally used when we want to demonstrate that we believe that people would behave in a predicted way, the good one or the bad one. Trust is, therefore, only a positive side of predictability that increases our capability of predicting by means of a communication. The second component is *reliability*. To be reliable means to be confiding. Confiding stands for behaving in accordance with one's own interests and interests of a team, honesty, keeping promises, keeping quiet about confidential information and keeping the other team members updated (Gundry, 2000).

Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996) have developed 'the swift' concept of trust for the short-lived teams whose existence, as the existence of the global virtual teams, is centred around the common tasks which are to be done in a short period of time. Here, the gaining of trust is narrowly connected to following the certain rules: coming on a meeting as scheduled; hearing out what other team members have to say; criticising the ideas, not the people; completing the tasks as scheduled; constructive problem solving; avoidance of an unnecessary discussions; creation of situations where there are no losers; creating an atmosphere where everyone is equally responsible for the team's success. At the same time, having distrust is connected to some disadvantages of virtual teams such as: loneliness and isolation, being too busy, low knowledge transfer rate, the logistic problems which appear out of the aggravated contact with team members which is a result of both barriers of time and space are omnipresent (Brown, et al., 2007).

The concept of trust in highly fragile, tottering environment like the virtual one rests primarily on cognitive elements, rather than on affective elements. Nevertheless, Kanawattanachai and Yoo point out that the difference between the two is not clearly explained. Virtual teams are short on time and therefore are forced to earn each other's trust rapidly. Unlike the trust researches that regard the groups, organizations and society, the authors are oriented towards the interpersonal level of trust among the group members, which is defined as an exertion the person completes the task with, regarding communication, actions and decisions. In these circumstances, the trust must be earned rapidly, it must be conferred presumptively or *ax ante*. Most of the authors agree on the fact that shaping and maintaining the swift trust lies more on cognitive and active sphere than on interpersonal relations. Swift trust therefore represents a special form of action by which the predominance of the cognitive over the affective sphere is explained (Jawadi, 2006). In virtual environment the team has higher degree of cognitive based trust (Kanawattanachai/Yoo, 2005). But in virtual teams where members usually work together in one short-lived project, there may not be enough time to get to know their co-workers well enough to determine who is trustworthy, and who is not. In that way, the teams that obtain the high level of trust tend to hire their members continually and in that way continue the communication between the members by focusing on the work content and appropriate socialization during the early project stages (Kanawattanachai/Yoo, 2005).

The members of efficacious virtual teams earn each other's trust and have faith in their leaders. It is proved that interpersonal trust facilitates cooperation, connects the members and does not require strict control. It implies the

acceptance and dedications to the goal achievements and group leader's decisions, which is very helpful in creating a positive atmosphere and understanding each other at both individual and collective level, and enables functioning and doing business in a network.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Working in virtual environment, just as the virtual organisation, virtual team and the completely new organizational paradigm, came as a result of a dominant theory and practice of the innovative companies whose work is based on the informational and computer technologies. The characteristic of this newly arisen configuration is seen primarily in liberation of both spatial and temporal obstacles. Flexibility, constant changes and dynamism are major characteristics of working within the virtual environment. The virtual community members cooperate even though they may have met only once during the project realization. In that way the key preverbal element and communication are omitted, and they are both the basis for earning the trust as a key factor of social relations. Team leaders remain with the mission to develop this dimension, which is, in spite of transferring work into a virtual space, a key factor for goal achievement.

Technology doubtlessly keeps the world spinning and it paves the way to industrial and post-industrial society, but it is still uncertain whether it will have a positive or a negative effect on life and prosperity of generations to come. One of the influences of a technology on social behavioural patterns is observed in a trust domain that is now transferred into the network. Computer and communication revolution open the door to new cultural expressions and enlarge the differences among the lifestyles due to the increased number of options available (Bell, 2001). New technologies appearance implies a certain element of risk that is referred to a dimension of trust without which we would not be able to function in everyday life. Social relations today are a copy of a dynamic structure of the world of a technology we are living in. New virtual working environment entails modification and reorganization of jobs and employment, which will gradually lead to abandoning traditional forms of work. At the same time, remodelling of norms and values is at stand, as are the codes of social functioning.

Therefore, the analysis and the results of the theoretical discussion show that trust within the virtual working environment still represents the key element to a successful work process. Temporality of the project, flexibility, dynamics of members change, geographical dispersion; among all the negative aspects

have also the positive ones. There is a possibility of gathering members concerning primarily their qualities, knowledge, skills and expertise. But, at the same time, members do not know each other; they come from different socio-cultural milieu, and consequently have different value systems, norms and behavioral rules which are characterized by their own culture. But, creating a new, virtual culture implicates the existence of new virtual identities whose structural elements are still norms, value systems which now exist within new social theory of a network society. The dimension of trust is experiencing some modifications, but not within its basic determination as a 'social glue' which binds and holds together their members and enables a successful work organization, but in temporality and flexibility segment.

All this generates new interests within sociology which sees the virtual connecting as a possibility to be more efficient and to create synergy. Within that context it is possible to talk about a sociology of virtual organization and teams, which puts all team members in a centre of its preoccupation, altogether with their geographical and socio-cultural differences. In this sociological discipline the stress is on acquisition of new technologies and adjustment to them, internal group dynamics, flexibility and assimilation, the socialization process and trust as a key dimension to all present and future social occurrences, processes and phenomena.

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## **DIMENZIJA POVJERENJA U VIRTUALNOM RADNOM OKRUŽENJU**

### **Sažetak**

Novi oblici rada u umreženom društvu posljedica su informatičkih pomaka koji utječu na smjenu tradicionalnih obrazaca rada onim suvremenim. Nove oblike prvenstveno karakterizira premještanje rada u mrežu te njegovo koncipiranje unutar virtualnih organizacija i timova. Oslobođanje od prostornih i vremenskih prepreka nosi niz prednosti prilikom koncipiranja novih oblika rada. Ovim je olakšano i ubrzano formiranje timova s naglaskom na izvrsnost i fleksibilnost. Dimenzija povjerenja kao značajna strukturalna socio-psihološka kategorija tradicionalnih radnih oblika i procesa, ujedno je i ključna strukturalna dimenzija društvenih odnosa unutar umreženog društva (network). Radi se o učinkovitom «društvenom ljepilu» koje je i u novonastalim virtualnim socio-ekonomskim konfiguracijama presudno za njihovo uspješno funkcioniranje i odvijanje.