

Virtual Teams: Benefits & Challenges

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I recently updated all of my 'success factors' briefing papers for the [UKeiG web site](#) and this year added one on virtual team management. Although the current language of business speaks of 'collaboration' it does not speak of 'virtual collaboration' but of virtual teams. This is useful because not all teams work in a collaborative way with a common cause. A team can be defined as a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems, and who manage their relationship across organisational boundaries. A team therefore has a unity of purpose, a social structure, and its members share a common responsibility for outcomes which is not necessarily a common cause.

Probably the most comprehensive survey of virtual team adoption currently available was undertaken by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) in late 2009.

The main reasons quoted in the report for establishing virtual teams were

- Improve collaboration with other business units
- Tap into a larger pool of expertise
- Improve competitiveness through a faster response to opportunities
- Cost reduction, especially travel costs and the need for internal meeting spaces
- Improve collaboration with customers, suppliers and partners

The challenges of working in virtual teams were seen as

- Misunderstandings due to differences in culture, language and an inability to read people's expressions
- Difficulty in leading teams remotely
- Difficulty in building camaraderie and trust
- Difficulty in managing the productivity of virtual teams
- Managing information overload

Building a virtual team takes a lot of care and effort. The considerations of language, location, time and culture have to be taken into account in not only the selection of the staff concerned but also in setting up and managing each meeting. There may be potentially a key member of the virtual team who does not have good spoken language skills and it may be necessary to bring in an interpreter who themselves may not have the security clearance to be participating in the meeting.

Adding someone to the team may be required but removing someone could be very difficult. In a physical meeting situation a quiet word to a manager may be effective but in a virtual team that call has to be made by 'phone, and the person who is asked to leave may feel that not enough has been done to enable them to contribute to the meeting. The newcomer may also change the dynamics and levels of trust in the team.

The word TEAM provides a useful mnemonic for virtual teams

- Trust between members of the team, and that their work is worthwhile, is essential. Once broken it cannot be rebuilt
- Engagement is very difficult to achieve in a virtual team and so has to be worked on in a step-by-step approach recognising that each member of the team is an individual
- Achievement, both personal and as a team, should be recognised and used to build engagement and trust
- Membership needs to be kept under continuous review, as just one person that fails to achieve and/or fails to engage and/or fails to understand the importance of trust will have a major impact on every other member

Culture, time and place

Virtual teams have three dimensions to their operation

- National and organisational culture (which includes language)
- Time
- Location

These need to be taken into account at all times in the planning, execution and review of a virtual meeting. A simple '3D' graphic pinned to a desktop can be a valuable mnemonic.

Most multi-national companies adopt English as a corporate language for corporate communications, but certainly companies outside of the USA are made aware every day that this is a guideline and not a command. This is especially the case in Europe where it is difficult to travel more than 500 miles from a city centre without entering a country with a different language.

In meetings with attendees from different countries it is often easier for them to understand English spoken as a second (or even third) language than English spoken by a native speaker because of the use of idioms and inadvertently complex sentence constructions. An important point that is often overlooked is that native speakers of English need to allow time between sentences to give others a chance to 'translate' concepts (rather than words) into their own language.

When planning virtual team meetings it is important to understand that there are four elements of language skills

- The ability to speak
- The ability to understand what is being said
- The ability to write
- The ability to read

Individual team members may have different levels of skill in each of these four areas, and making an assumption to the contrary could lead to major problems with understanding and with decision making.

The concept of location is also complex. Members of the virtual team could be in different floors of the same building, in different buildings, in different countries and of course not even in a building at all but on a train, plane or in a hotel dining room. With audio or Skype video conferences it might not be at all obvious where the attendees are actually sitting. The location may have an impact on ambient noise levels, on whether the attendee can be overheard by colleagues or strangers, and on whether it is possible for the attendee to write notes of the meeting. This mobile location component is increasingly important as mobile technology enables people to be away from their offices on a more extended basis.

Even a small company operating on a regional basis may want to include one or more of its employees with others in a virtual meeting. It is important to understand that even having one person 'phoning in to what otherwise would be a regular physical meeting will change the dynamics of the meeting. This is especially the case when the person leading the meeting tries to do so from a remote location, or even on vacation. This is because another aspect of location is the distribution effect. If the majority of the participants are in one location then they will be a dominant force in the discussion, especially if the leader of the meeting is also present at that location. They will also have the benefit of being able to see the body language of their colleagues and to time their contributions to the discussion.

Just some of the challenges of time in virtual meetings include different times to start and end the working day and public holidays being taken on different days (even in the UK!). We all want to manage our own diaries and feel uncomfortable when someone calls a meeting at an unsuitable time without prior consultation. Even if we can actually participate in the meeting we may do so in a less-than-constructive way. Even a small change in time, say from 09.00 to 08.30 could be very difficult for people commuting by public transport to accommodate easily.

Training requirements

In view of the increasing importance of virtual teams companies should be providing training in how to manage virtual teams but very few do so. Team leaders in particular will need to gain some additional skills.

These include

- Understanding the skills and experience that team members need to have to be effective members of a virtual team
- Maintaining close working relationships with the managers of team members to ensure they are aware of the organisation and office environment in which team members are operating
- Taking additional time to prepare for a meeting so that for example all team members have the documents they need several days in advance
- Being adept at using conferencing and social media applications to help the team achieve objectives
- Being able to motivate team members that they have not met, and may not have chosen to be a member of the team
- Being ready to call team members by name to contribute, remembering which team members may not have spoken for a period of time
- Accepting that it is very difficult to concentrate on leading a virtual team meeting and make notes of the discussions and actions

A team leader who is excellent in managing physical meetings may not be equally as proficient when managing virtual team meetings. If leading or even participating in virtual teams is a core activity then their performance should be included in annual performance appraisals.

Some companies have built a certification process into virtual team participation so that employees (and managers) initially build up expertise in single country/same time zone virtual meetings and then progress to managing complex multi-national, multi-cultural teams in due course.

Recommendations

My ten recommendations for getting the best out of virtual teams and virtual team meetings are

1. Recognise that virtual teams are going to be increasingly important to any organisation, and ensure that current and potential participants have access to training and mentoring on virtual team management and virtual team meetings.
2. Virtual teams should have very clear objectives so that it is possible to set the investment in the team against the outcome and also that team members bring appropriate skills, expertise and authority to take action.
3. Leadership skills that work for physical teams may not be as valuable in a virtual team environment. Other skills are needed and have to be acquired through practice, not just through reading or teaching.
4. Without good team meetings a virtual team is very unlikely to achieve its objectives and so particular care should be taken in developing guidelines for virtual meetings and for facilitating feedback.
5. Develop good profiles of each team member, taking into account local availability of technology and offices, which can be used to take part in virtual meetings (especially in the case of open-plan offices) and language expertise.

6. Ideally each team should have an opportunity to meet with other members of the team at the outset of the team being set up. Where this is not possible there should be an initial virtual meeting where team members can introduce themselves and gain experience with the technology being used before the first formal meeting of the team.
7. Team dynamics of virtual teams can be quite fragile, often depending on a very high level of trust in people they may not have met before. Introducing a new team member into an existing team may mean starting the process of building trust all over again.
8. Social media applications can be of value in supporting virtual teams but may need to be tailored to specific team requirements.
9. Issues of language and culture need careful consideration but should never be an excuse not to bring specific individuals into a team.
10. Every member of a virtual team should feel that they have gained from their participation the experience that is useful to their local situation and their personal career development.