

VIRTUAL TEAMS – AN OPPORTUNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

Communication has always represented an important point in the success of any project, regardless of its nature. Therefore, most experts today, turn their attention to find more efficient ways of communication between people. In this context and in the globalization context, virtual teams represent an opportunity for many companies. The purpose of this article is to present the basic aspects of a virtual team, the opportunities of working in a virtual team and some recommendations to streamline the work in such teams.

Keywords: Virtual teams, Communication, Trust, Globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent researches in the business environment required a reconsideration of how employees collaborate and communicate among themselves, due to the speed with which technology advances today in all areas, especially in the sphere of communication. In this context, more and more companies manage to overcome geographical and cultural barriers they faced several decades ago, by transforming traditional teams in multicultural teams, or even more than that, in virtual teams. But what is actually a virtual team and what are the advantages it offers?

Lipnack and Stamps (1997) defines virtual team as: A group of people who interact through interdependent tasks, are guided by a common purpose, and work across space, time and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technologies. Bal Wilding and Gundry (2000), characterize virtual teams by listing some of their main features:

- Team members are goal oriented.
- Team members are dispersed geographically (nationally or internationally).
- The team works apart more than in the same location.
- The team is collection of individuals who work together to attain goals by using computer supported networking.

- Team members are mutually accountable for team results.

Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) state that the tasks of virtual teams are often complex and strategically important. In other words, most often the virtual teams are created with a specific purpose, namely improving project results through deeper knowledge of the domain of interest and through the exchange of ideas among people with different cultures.

2. THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF A VIRTUAL TEAM

Once understood the concept of virtual team, we must see the premises that lead to their creation and their main features.

Over the years, traditional teams have seen various transformations (Table 1) in terms of how they operate. In other words, nowadays people do not rely on the idea of being part of a single team with fixed structure, driven by a manager, for an indefinite period of time. Rather, the employees prefer the option of working in a complex team and at the same time, one employee can be part of several teams.

TABLE 1 TRADITIONAL TEAM VS. MODERN TEAM

From:	To:
Fixed team membership	Shifting team membership
Team members are dedicated 100% to the team	Most people are members of multiple teams
Teams have a fixed starting And ending point	Teams form and reform continuously
Teams are managed by a single manager	Teams have multiple reporting relationships with different parts of the organization at different times

Source: Kimball, 1997.

What differentiate a virtual team from a normal team are *the geographical dispersion* and *the use of technology for communication*. Virtual team members do not work in the same place. Virtual team members works in different places (can work in different buildings, cities, countries or even continents). Also, virtual teams use advanced technological means of communication, using modern communication devices such as:

- Smartphones: Intelligent phones enabling the receipt in real time of the e-mail messages, and that allow modification for Office and PDF documents and have access to the Internet or Intranet.
- Audio conferencing and videoconferencing involves extremely low cost and they ensure secure transmission of information in real time with team members. They, however, have a major

weakness, namely that team members must find a time that is suitable for all the members in order to initiate such conferences.

- Communication via e-mail has the advantage of being fast, but there is a risk with the data, because the security of the e-mail is not guaranteed.
- Chat forum and friends forum can also be used in virtual communication, allowing secure data transfer between team members.
- Shared databases: are used for people to see the results of each member of the team and allow them to share information offline.
- Face to face meetings are a must in virtual teams, because they increase the trust of the members.

Iris Dagan and Danielle Mandell (2006) classify these communication tools according to cost and complexity (see Figure 1). According to them, the telephone is the easiest and cheapest way of communication, and face to face meetings are the most complex and costly communication tools.

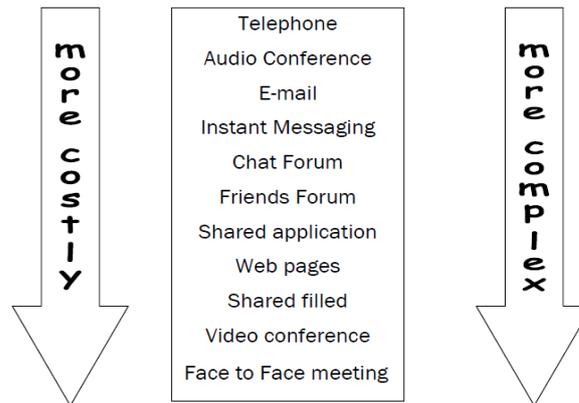


FIGURE 1 TOOLS TO COMMUNICATE OVER THE TIME AND PLACE DIMENSIONS
Source: Dagan and Mandell, 2006.

3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Since collaboration through web applications is a necessity today, and the means of communication have evolved considerably, the need for working at distance is firstly needed in many situations and secondary, is very easy and accessible, having extremely important advantages that more companies is beginning to consider:

Savings for companies

Most companies do not work exclusively with virtual teams, and often is recommended to organize meetings, so people could see each other face to face. However, there are situations where communication can be done online and so the company can save the cost of travel and accommodation for its employees.

A more efficient use of time

Since virtual team members can work even at home, they can better plan their time but at the same time they are required to meet certain deadlines because usually members' work for the team is connected and interdependent.

Making decisions in the context of being fully informed

Decisions for virtual teams are made differently, because people do not always work the same. Erin Meyer (2010) investigated the decision-making process and found that in Sweden teams learn to make decisions through lengthy consensus building, which can span many meetings but eventually leads to strong buy-in and rapid implementation. In France the Descartes-inspired education system teaches that debate and confrontation are necessary elements of any decision-making process. And in Japan decisions tend to be made in informal one-on-one discussions before a formal group meeting. In other words, in the case of a virtual team, decisions are made in the context of being fully informed on the current situation and project managers need to adapt their decisions quickly when changes occur.

A better internal communication and transparency of information

The success of any organization depends mostly of communication. Unlike traditional teams in where information may be perceived wrong, incomplete or late, in the case of virtual teams this flow of information is more secure because they often communicate through messages (e-mail, forum, chat) and there is a limit to the time that a message can be communicated.

Intelligent thinking

As people begin to practice virtual communication, they seek to find solutions to streamline their time and business.

A better permeability

Specialists can occur inside and outside the virtual team.

Greater overall efficiency

A virtual team can work on several projects simultaneously. Also, one person may be part of multiple virtual teams simultaneously.

Increased productivity

Most often, companies organize meetings that actually decrease overall productivity. In the case of virtual teams, meetings can be made at home, and thus the time spent on the route to the office or to the courtroom is removed. Many workers report their telecommuting days are far more productive than at the office because there are no interruptions from those who are wander the hallways at work.

In addition to the advantages it offers to the companies, building virtual teams presents globally advantages such as *less pollution*. If the team members reduce their roads to work and back home, they will certainly have a positive impact on the environment by slowing down pollution. Therefore, the process of telecommuting is encouraged.

The setting of virtual teams has some barriers, of which the most important are: building trust among team members - this is difficult due to the perception of cultural differences and attitudes towards this diversity (a study by Cisco Systems identified trust to be the essential element to the effectiveness of virtual teams), motivating virtual employees and less commitment to co-workers and company, due to less development personal relationships and less face to face interactions.

4. WAYS TO STREAMLINE VIRTUAL TEAMS

Obviously, managing a virtual team involves a new challenge for managers and leaders. There are several critical aspects in the thinking of a virtual team manager that are totally different from those of a traditional manager, and must fundamentally change to get efficiency in companies (Table 2).

TABLE 2 FEATURES OF THE NEW MANAGEMENT PARADIGM

Current considerations	New management paradigm
Face to face meetings represent the best way to interact and anything else is a compromise	Different methods of communication may reinforce the quality of interaction. What matters is how they are used.
Collaboration is what happens when teams interact at a certain time in a certain space.	Collaboration takes place in a dynamic way, without boundaries of time and space.
Being people-oriented is incompatible with the use of technology.	The use of the technology in a people-oriented manner is possible and desirable.
When communication is not working, technology is the cause.	When communication is not working, the management strategies of interaction should be evaluated, not only the technical tools.
Learning to lead a virtual team means learning how to use technology.	Learning to lead a virtual team means to understand more about the team and the collaboration process.

Source: Ghilic-Micu and Stoica, 2003, p. 15.

It is, therefore, necessary, to establish strategies to increase the effectiveness of virtual teams, which should start first with communication, as it is the key instrument that leads to the success of virtual teams. Therefore, it is recommended that the project manager should find suitable communication tools. He or she can also establish clear rules:

It is important to define from the beginning of the project the role of each team member and this can be done through written job descriptions which are distributed through a shared database system. It is also important to establish clear expectations for each team member.

Fixed working hours could seem quite rigid since the virtual teams try to remove barriers of time, but it is necessary for team members to focus and work to meet deadlines.

Another rule, in order to increase work efficiency in virtual teams is to try to discover more about the team members. This could lead to increased confidence, and could be achieved through a system of tests and interactive projects online (something like online teambuilding). Discovering the strengths of each member could thus lead to more efficient distribution of tasks and to creating opportunities for the whole team. In addition to online testing, in order for team members to know each other better, face to face meetings can be organized occasionally (some alternatives could be social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Skype, but they are not as effective because they greatly limit the individual's non-verbal communication). Professor Ian Woodward has demonstrated through practical exercises that moving your body while speaking enhances your voice quality. Managers of global virtual teams who sit rigidly at their desks, glued to Skype or videoconference screens, tend to lose their interpersonal or persuasive edge. Walking around or simply moving your arms is just one of many simple but effective communication tricks that managers can use to improve the sound of their message (Meyer, 2010).

Other problems that may arise in the communication between virtual team members may be removed by: giving additional explanations in case the deadlines are over passed, setting clear objectives and maintaining transparency in the project and by communicating difficulties and by meeting deadlines.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, the increasing importance of time for each individual (and we refer here to the time spent at the working place and the time lost from work to home) and the technological progress in communication are prerequisites for creating virtual teams, that are mainly characterized by the geographical dispersion of members and are bound to communicate via modern electronic instruments. Although trust is hard to build in such conditions, and a total commitment from employees is difficult to

achieve, there are some principles that can be used to ensure the effectiveness of work in a virtual environment. Thus, virtual teams are becoming an increasingly important topic in different fields of business, because they provide clear and important advantages compared to traditional teams.

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