Virtual Teamwork:
Best Practices for Working in a Networked Economy

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Overview

In contemporary organizations, sole individuals are finding it increasingly difficult to perform work tasks on their own. Common responsibilities, such as analyzing day-to-day issues and solving basic business problems, are no longer possible without contacting one's colleagues and seeking input from others. Thus, the very nature of non-routine work has created the need for groups of individuals to work more collaboratively to accomplish core business objectives.

In addition to the type of work being performed, key business drivers are also rapidly changing in this Networked Economy. New demands, such as global competition and "speed to market", have further solidified the need for organizational transformation. Teams with an eye for creativity and innovation are helping businesses of all kind, companies small and large, well-established firms and start-up operations, organizations for profit and not-for-profit, meet these new market conditions.

Recent advances in communication and information technology are also contributing to the success of these teams by enabling team members, not to mention the knowledge and expertise they bring, to be distributed across vast geographies. Team members are no longer restricted to similar locations in close proximity. In fact, key contributors on teams can be pulled together from around the world without being burdened by the added costs or personal stress of business travel. In light of the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington DC on September 11, 2001, this seemingly inconsequential convenience is actually having a tremendous impact on improving employee productivity and enhancing organizational performance.

By providing this clear business advantage, these *virtual teams* are quickly becoming an increasingly important part of our workforce. Creating excellence and high performance in these virtual teams, however, still remains a mystery to many business leaders.

Critical Success Factors for Virtual Teams

While researchers and practitioners alike once believed that virtual team performance was driven by technology alone, empirical research conducted by this author in addition to professional experiences while advising virtual teams has shown that virtual teams are dependent on much more than the technologies they are equipped with. In fact, several different factors can impact the performance of a virtual team. These variables relate not only to the technologies available to the team but also the internal group dynamics and external support mechanisms of the team.

The graphic on the following page details five specific factors that have proven critical when designing and supporting effective virtual teams[i]. The remainder of this section will provide a more detailed discussion of each of these critical success factors.
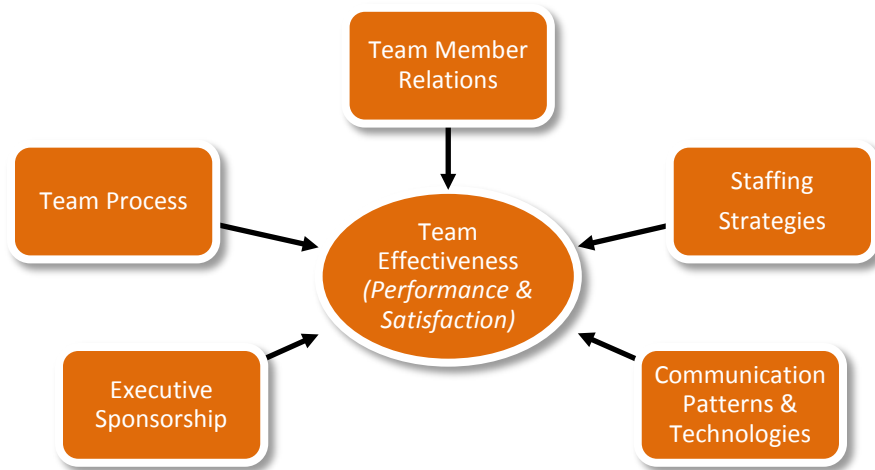
Strong Team Member Relations

Strong team member relations must exist between virtual team members if they are to achieve their shared goals. One way to begin the bonding process between team members is to clarify the team's mission and primary objectives. Addressing any questions or concerns regarding individual roles and responsibilities can also encourage the necessary environment for collaboration. This information will help individual team members make the connection to one another and develop a shared understanding of the task at hand.

In addition, team members must learn to trust and rely on one another for support. When working in a virtual world, individuals rarely have a strong support network within their local area to call on for assistance. Instead, virtual team members must turn to each other for technical, and even emotional, support. Providing team members the opportunity to interact socially during face-to-face meetings can expedite this relationship building process. Whenever possible, these sessions should be scheduled early in the team's development to lay the foundation for future virtual work and mitigate any risk of potential conflict later on.

Positive Team Processes

Positive team processes can keep virtual teams on the right track by reducing potential confusion or conflict between team members. Team leaders must invest sufficient time and energy into the design process to ensure the team is ready and able to perform its work. During this design phase, considering structural issues like team type and composition is essential. Is this team going to be in place for a short period of time or will it permanently remain as an intact work group? Will this team only consist of individuals from the same business unit or function or will it consist of a broader contingency from cross-functional or cross-organizational work groups? Answers to questions like these will guide the initial design of the team processes.

Establishing specific processes to manage routine communications and team interactions is also imperative. Formal procedures for solving problems, making decisions, tracking issues, and knowledge management will go a long way towards promoting effective virtual team operations. Another important team practice that cannot be neglected is performance management. Scheduling progress reviews to monitor ongoing performance and regular team debrief sessions to discuss lessons learned should all be a part of the performance management process.

Effective Staffing Strategies

Effective staffing strategies will greatly improve the chances of fielding a successful virtual team. Technical competence is clearly an important factor when evaluating prospective virtual team members, but there are several other selection criteria to consider. First, virtual team members should be selected based on their existing skills and capacity to adapt to a dispersed work environment, not because they happen to be available or are struggling in their current positions. In addition, virtual team members should be independent workers who are relatively self-sufficient. People who require minimal supervision and direction are ideal candidates for virtual work arrangements.

Furthermore, successful virtual team members will command a strong presence in virtual settings. They will be able to express their ideas through electronic media and not be impaired by the technology. This can sometimes be difficult for extraverts who gain their energy from more personal interactions. Most importantly, virtual teamwork requires the presence of team players who are willing, and able, to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Supportive Executive Sponsorship

Supportive executive sponsorship enables virtual team members to complete their work without being preoccupied with managing issues or handling organizational politics. In this manner, executive sponsorship differs greatly from the old style of command-and-control management. The principles of micro-management and authoritarian supervision do not contribute to building trust and performing work across great distances. Executive sponsors, on the other hand, do facilitate the team's process by clearly stating the team's objectives and providing general guidelines for the approach. Executive sponsors, then, relinquish their authoritative control to those performing the work and focus on creating the right environment for them to succeed.

This often requires executive sponsors to champion the team's efforts throughout the organization. Executive sponsors must advocate the team's work to potential resistors who might not understand the team's purpose. For example, if a manager will not allow his/her subordinate to take part in virtual work arrangements, then the executive sponsor must clearly explain the team's objectives and the specific reasons why this individual is so valuable to the team. In addition, executive sponsors are responsible for securing the necessary resources for the team to do its work. This may involve providing adequate funding for team travel budgets or simply procuring the required tools to properly equip the team.

Formal Communication Patterns and Advanced Technologies

Formal communication patterns and advanced technologies are at the heart of virtual teamwork. In fact, they make virtual teamwork possible. The virtual workplace would not exist without the recent advances in technology, thus the importance of information systems increases exponentially for virtual teams. A virtual team's arsenal consists of all the common tools we often take for granted, such as email and voicemail, as well as more advanced technologies, like videoconferencing and groupware applications.

The technology alone, however, is not enough to make a successful virtual team. Without a clear understanding of what tool to use and when, virtual team members are at great risk of impeding their virtual communications. For example, email is a powerful tool for sharing basic information with a colleague across the world when it is not time-critical. You would not choose email, however, to conduct a real-time brainstorming session with ten different people. Every available tool has specific strengths and weaknesses. Virtual team members must develop a clear protocol for selecting the most appropriate communication tool and ensuring proper and consistent usage for all team members.

Implications and Conclusions

While there are some very basic differences between virtual teams and their collocated predecessors, at their core, virtual teams are still teams. As such, any intervention to improve virtual team effectiveness must be well rooted in the same fundamental strategies you would use with a collocated team.

First, virtual team members must develop strong relationships that are based on trust and respect for one another. In addition, they must establish positive team processes that clarify how team members will coordinate their work. Next, virtual teams should be comprised of only those individuals who are capable of working in a virtual world. Furthermore, strong executive sponsorship is needed to facilitate and support virtual team efforts. These common strategies that are often used to enhance traditional team efforts can help establish a solid foundation for virtual teams as well.

Virtual teams, however, must also clear the vast distances that separate team members from one another. To overcome the existing space, time, and organizational boundaries, additional strategies that provide increased connectivity between team members must be implemented to address these concerns. For this reason, formal communication protocols that guide the consistent use of advanced technologies may prove extremely useful in promoting virtual team effectiveness. In addition, virtual team members must remember to create opportunities for more personal contact and face-to-face interactions.

A Case History: The Virtual Training Team

What do you do when you need to prepare almost 12,000 employees nationwide for a major reorganization and launch of a new portal technology? You could send one person to each of your more than 200 business locations to train each individual manager and associate, but by the time the person finished the job, the changes may very well be ancient history as the organization prepares to implement

a wide array of new initiatives.

In today's Networked Economy, there is an alternative. When one of the nation's largest publicly traded managed health care companies was faced with this very business challenge, they developed a more appropriate strategy for change. They established a virtual training team to do the job.

This company was in the process of transforming its HR department into a new operating structure. This change involved a new service model, one in which individual employees would perform many of their routine HR transactions online instead of contacting their local HR specialists for help. Thus, managers and associates would use self-service technologies to complete these tasks themselves. If they needed assistance, they would have to contact a central call center for support.

While this change was expected to have a positive impact on the organization, making the transition would be difficult for many employees, employees who were accustomed to having their local HR staff perform these tasks for them. Now, imagine how they would respond if they did not understand the change and were not trained on how to use the new technology.

To prepare all managers and associates for this change, the company called upon each of the business units to support a virtual team approach. This team was comprised of at least one representative from each of the six business units and approximately five other individuals from the core project team. The business unit representatives were chartered with the primary task of learning about the upcoming changes and then returning to their individual business units with the knowledge and information needed to train their respective organizations. The core project team members were responsible for helping each of the business unit representatives accomplish these goals.

During the course of this effort, the virtual training team realized the importance of the five critical success factors previously discussed. First, executive sponsorship was a key part of the team's success from the beginning. With the active participation of the Senior Vice-President of Organization Effectiveness and several Vice-Presidents who reported directly to her, this project benefited from the dedicated support of the organization's senior leadership. This increased visibility made the team's work a high priority across the organization.

In addition, the staffing strategies for building the virtual team helped enhance the effectiveness of the team. The six Vice-Presidents of Organization Effectiveness individually selected their top performers to serve on the team. They also made these resources accountable for coordinating the project from its initial design and provided additional part-time resources as needed to support the final rollout in their respective business units.

Next, the team established consistent processes to manage their work. The core project team members helped develop and coordinate the information sharing and knowledge management between team members. They also facilitated the decision-making and problem-solving processes for the team.

As part of these process efforts, the team also established a clear communications protocol to manage their interactions. Over a two-month period, team members utilized email as the standard communication vehicle for sharing information. In addition, they held weekly conference calls to review status updates and make decisions regarding next steps. Before rolling out any training to their individual business units, team members also came together in one location for a two-day train-the-trainer session. This meeting was critical because it gave individual team members the opportunity to interact in person and learn about the upcoming changes as a collective group.

Finally, the relationships that developed between team members held the group together even though they were distributed across the country. Team members established positive working relations during the regular conference calls and other team communications, however the in-person contact that occurred during the train-the-trainer session created much stronger bonds between team members. Ultimately, this is what really made the difference. These relationships enabled better information sharing between team members and encouraged them to support one another during the rollout process.

In this example, the virtual training team delivered several key results to the business. First, the team facilitated a highly effective enterprise-wide training program. Through this work, the team also enabled the successful rollout of the new HR organization structure, the delivery model, and the self-service technologies. Furthermore, the virtual training team increased user acceptance of the change and expedited the transition process by helping individual employees understand and adjust to the changes as they occurred.

Most importantly, these dispersed business unit representatives who rarely, if ever, communicated with each other prior to joining the virtual team, instilled a new culture for collaboration and knowledge transfer within the organization. The lasting impact of this cultural shift was, and continues to be, invaluable for the company.

Tools for Enhancing Your Virtual Teamwork

Anyone can create positive and productive virtual team experiences such as this one. On the following pages, two separate tools are presented to help you improve the performance of your virtual team. The first is a survey questionnaire for benchmarking the performance of your virtual team against the five critical success factors previously discussed. The second is a checklist for designing an effective virtual team right from the start.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Your Virtual Team

Evaluating the performance of your virtual team can help you better understand what specific areas may need improvement. Using the critical success factors previously discussed as your benchmark enables you to target your efforts in a more productive manner and can significantly enhance the overall performance of your team.

The survey questionnaire below provides you and your fellow virtual team members fifteen key questions to ask in order to benchmark your performance against the five factors for success.[ii]

Questionnaire for Benchmarking Virtual Teams
☐ Are team members selected to the team based on their individual talents and abilities?
☐ Are team members technically competent in using the available tools and technologies?
☐ Does the executive sponsor communicate the vision to team members and the surrounding organization?
☐ Do team members have a shared understanding of the team's purpose and overall business objectives?
☐ Do team members trust each other to perform quality work in a timely manner?
☐ Do team members maintain contact with one another on a regular basis?
☐ Does the team successfully use a complement of tools and technologies to exchange routine business information (i.e., phone, telephone/videoconference, email, shared databases, face-to-face, etc.)?
☐ Do executive sponsors promote the use of electronic communication and information technologies?
☐ Does the management approach promote team member participation in decision-making and issue resolution?
☐ Is time dedicated to conducting team building activities and further developing team member relations throughout the life of the team?
☐ Do team members hold team celebrations and plan future phases of work at the completion of major milestones?
☐ Does the team complete its work on time and within budget?
☐ Is the team effective in reaching its goals and stated objectives?
☐ Does the team function like a cohesive unit?
☐ Do team members enjoy being a part of the team?

Designing An Effective Virtual Team from the Start

Creating the right conditions for virtual teamwork to succeed is imperative in the early stages of a team's development. Using a comprehensive checklist to design your virtual team in the beginning, then, can go a long way towards enhancing the future performance of the team.

The following checklist provides you and your fellow virtual team members fifteen activities to perform in order to create and maintain an environment for virtual team success.[iii]

Checklist for Designing and Supporting Virtual Teams
☑ Consider organizational imperatives and define business case for implementing virtual teams.
☑ Clearly articulate vision and corporate objectives to all employees.
☑ Design virtual jobs that are challenging and intrinsically rewarding.

☑	Select team members based on individual talents and abilities, including technical competence and interpersonal skills.
☑	Explain team purpose, roles, and responsibilities to all team members.
☑	Conduct initial face-to-face meeting to clarify team objectives and facilitate team-building activities.
☑	Establish processes for sharing information, making decisions, and resolving miscommunications or potential conflicts.
☑	Ensure team members have clear goals and recommend potential approaches to perform work.
☑	Equip team with required communication and information technologies.
☑	Provide team members access to all information needed to perform work tasks.
☑	Demonstrate use of electronic media through on-going team communications and group conferences.
☑	Facilitate technical workshops and interpersonal training sessions to help team members work in dispersed environment.
☑	Encourage stronger interpersonal relationships through trust and respect for team members.
☑	Promote initiative by including all team members in important team activities.
☑	Recognize individual and team efforts through rewards and other performance incentives, such as team celebrations.

[i] J.S. Lurey. (1999, July) Five key strategies to improving your virtual teams. In International conference for advances in management conference proceedings. Baton Rouge, LA.

[ii] J.S. Lurey. (2002) "Virtual Teamwork." In S.M. Herman (Ed.), *Re-wiring organizations for the networked economy: Organizing, managing, and leading in the information age* (pp. 73-96). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

[iii] Ibid.

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