

What are the unique challenges to managing a virtual team? essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Virtual teams represent the next stage in the evolution of corporate organisations. Globalisation, downsizing, more flexible working practices and rapid advances in information technology has allowed and accelerated the need for businesses to span geographical and organisational boundaries (Merrick, 1996). A study of the meaning and characteristics of virtual teams shows how they meet the needs and challenges of this new workplace. However, the emergence of virtual teams radically alters the way organisations work and communicate. Virtual team management faces several new and complex challenges in overcoming time, distance and cultural boundaries, in building trust, collaboration and team cohesion, in supporting and controlling team processes and outputs, and adapting to technology driven communication.

Virtual teams “ are composed of employees, with unique skills, located at a distance from each other, who must collaborate to accomplish important organizational tasks” (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk & McPherson, 2002, p. 67). Tasks are co-ordinated across time zones, physical, cultural and organisational boundaries. These boundaries are the basis of the definition of a virtual team, and are also the basis for the unique challenges of managing a virtual team. Time and distance variation between team members can cause significant delays in information processing, especially when members work in opposite time zones so there is only a small or no window of real-time contact opportunity. This may frustrate team members who cannot proceed without a colleague’s response or deliverable, thus causing further delays (Joinson, 2002). Culture is another significant boundary.

Culture may be of national, organisational or functional derivation. This will affect the business practice, ethics, expectations and behaviour of team members (Duarte & Tennant Snyder, 1999). If the work habits of an individual are noticeably differing from others in the team because of their national culture, it may be a challenge for management to alter or integrate these ways so they will be appropriate to the team's performance and processes. There may also be uncertainty as to whether the performance of the individual is actually culturally based or whether it stems from task misunderstanding, equipment deficiency, or simply poor performance. Management may initially attribute the performance to cultural differences as they are wary of 'pointing the finger' in case of offending the individual, before the actual cause is exposed. This can cause major delays, as tasks are not completed satisfactorily or on time.

These boundaries can be overcome or at least somewhat alleviated by effective communication and by using the technologies available. However misunderstandings can still result from using these resources. Because a virtual team does not work in the same immediate environment and members may not share the same backgrounds, personalities, cultures, and languages, communication is far more difficult (Solomon, 2001). The communication styles and technologies used are critical in ensuring the tasks are completed to an acceptable standard. Cultural differences, biases, misunderstandings, technical abilities and interaction levels may distort or degrade the communication effectiveness within a virtual team. How each individual perceives information is unique and since the team is separated,

misinterpretation is probable. Individuals may believe they understand goals and instructions, when in fact they do not.

The complexity of a message may be increased considerably when several boundaries need to be crossed and ineffective communications media are used (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). The incorrect use of or lack of the appropriate technology to facilitate team communication can hamper productivity. Information must be exchanged via a medium that is fitting to the physical, situational and social context and level of formality required (Haywood, 1998). For example, email cannot be the sole method of communicating. At some stage, there needs to be some form of face-to face communication. “ The major disadvantages of virtual teams are the lack of interaction - with its associated verbal and nonverbal cues - and the synergies that often accompany face-to-face communication” (Cascio, 2000, p. 84).

The absence of traditional communicative cues (i. e., facial expression, gesture, and vocal inflection) makes subtleties in communication more difficult to convey and understand. There is always subtle body language produced when communicating that may or may not be in accordance with the spoken language. The formation of the virtual team is often a beneficial time to have face-to-face interaction as it gives the team a chance to introduce themselves, get an idea of who they are working with, and the goals and tasks for the team can be established and clarified (Geber, 1995).

However many factors can completely stop communication completely within the team. The cost of procuring and establishing media such as videoconferencing and networking facilities for all team members, or having the team physically meet in the same location, may be too great for some organisations, especially for those that are small in size or those that are widely dispersed geographically. Networking facilities may also not be available or incompatible with team members' software, equipment and security. Another challenge to the team is technophobia or the abilities of members to work with electronic communication media (Townsend & DeMarie, 1998). " One source of friction among distributed team members has to do with varying levels of familiarity with electronic communication etiquette" (Haywood, 1998, p. 14). The competence of individuals in using the various technologies available may widely differ; it may be a training issue, but it could also be a member-selection issue. There may be debate among the team about the best media choice for the situation. Familiarity and preference could be the driving factors, but not necessarily the best for the situation (Pauleen, 2004).

Successful communication techniques are vital in aiding goal achievement. Virtual teams rarely, if ever, meet in a face-to-face setting (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). Severely reduced levels of physical and face-to-face interaction or a diminished sense of presence can cause feelings of isolation, a lack of trust, understanding and integration, and difficulties in team building. " Some of level of social interaction with supervisors and co-workers is essential in almost all jobs" (Cascio, 2000, p. 82). Individuals may

feel left out, unimportant and unconnected. Team building is a way of overcoming this isolation, however this task is often challenging because of the complexities of getting the team together. Informal or social gatherings may be even more rare as distance and spare time difficulties emerge.

Team members may find it difficult to relate to other members because it takes longer to form impressions and to establish relationships. This can lead to a lack of trust, thus affecting performance and productivity. Inhibitions around team expectations of the project and other members amplify the perception of risk. Face-to-face and nonverbal communication is an important source of information in assessing other's credibility, finding common values and decreasing ambiguity and complexity (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). Management should endeavour to create interdependence within the group's tasks to increase communication and therefore trust.

Stability and an appropriate structure within the team are also important in establishing trust. The support and leadership of management needs to be more committed in monitoring the processes and competencies of the team than that of a traditional team. How does management know individuals are working on the right thing? And how can individuals receive the recognition they deserve? (Kirkman et al., 2002). If processes, goals and roles are not clearly conveyed, misunderstanding is likely. Support systems and constructive feedback are critical in ensuring the team is working effectively. Virtual teams require organised and “well defined procedures” (Frame, 2003, p. 239). If there are not identifiable processes for information exchange and knowledge sharing, inferior outputs and trust difficulties may

occur. Communication lines, understanding, motivation and cohesion may be prevented. Relevant information may go unseen, as team members do not trust other members. Management need to interact and monitor individual performance so that effective communications and trust can be established and mentoring or training provided when necessary.

A successful virtual team depends on management understanding the challenges facing the team. Determining and overcoming the major factors influencing the performance of the team is critical to the team and thus, the project being a success. Knowing how the team members are situated in terms of geography and time zones is one of the biggest challenges in co-ordinating the virtual team. Team member attributes are another major challenge to the cohesion and collaboration of the team. Culture, background, personality and language can lead to complexity and misunderstandings during communications. The techniques and abilities of individuals in using communications technologies may differ considerably. As technology plays a vital role in virtual teams, these abilities will either aid in communicative effectiveness or degrade it to a level where team collaboration and trust will be severely affected.

Communication is particularly important in a virtual team, as members are generally isolated from others. This separation and perhaps lack of face-to-face interaction also impedes the level of trust experienced between members. The support and procedures put in place by management are essential in ensuring that communication, behavioural and information exchanging processes promote trust, and teamwork to occur, and thus,

effective performance. Virtual teams that are not managed effectively " may be fighting an uphill battle in a global, competitive, and rapidly changing environment" (Duarte & Tennant Snyder, 1999, p. 4).

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