Virtual teams in organisations essay sample

Literature, Russian Literature

Introduction

With the need to explore new markets in new territories, globalisation has become the trend in many companies. Therefore, in many organizations the common factor is the use of teams and teamwork in completion of tasks (Lipnack & Stamps 2000). Basically, a team is defined as a group of individuals interacting interdependently and who are brought together or voluntarily to accomplish particular outcomes. Buhlman, (2006), posits that team usage enhances proficiency, receptiveness, and tractability within a company mainly because synergies are created amongst members having diverse knowledge, experience, and expertise. Computer-aided communications systems have also been essential in encourage the use of teams. The technologies have changed how team members collect and distribute information in turn changing the dynamics and relationships amongst members of a company (Buhlman 2006). Furthermore, computer-aided communications also provide avenues for groups or team members to use virtual or networked teams. Therefore, this paper will critically analyse the merits and demerits of virtual teams and how they are likely to develop in the future.

Concept of Virtual Teams

According to Schlenkrich and Upfold, (2009), virtual teams can use communication technologies that are computer-mediated to work in tandem across the company limits, time, and space. Members of a virtual team may be located in a confined space, in another location within a country, or across the globe, and may never meet physically. Hence, virtual teams can

be defined as co-workers dispersed by an organization working together in through a link of telecommunication and informational technologies to complete certain tasks (Berry 2011). However, technologies alone do not make teams virtual, but the degree on their reliance on the electronic technology. The six characteristics of virtual teams are: teams have limited membership and always intact despite change of membership; interdependence function designed by team or organization; joint responsibility; joint management across companies boundaries; geographical dispersion; and reliance on computer-aided communication as opposed to physical communication (Nunamaker, Reinig & Briggs 2009).

More importantly, teams that work through e-mails, chat groups, telephone or use other technological applications is more virtual compared to teams meeting face to face. The determinations of virtualness is thus, the quantity of time members of a team work apart from each other in far geographical positions and only communicate using distant communication technologies. For instance, files can be sent across to another office electronically for further clarification, yet physical communication is available if need be. This has the advantage of members being able to communicate, collaborate, and create outputs irrespective of time and space, because they are not bound by provisional constrains.

A virtual team must be able to communicate and relate well so as to carry-out tasks like any other team. However, choosing the technology to communicate with is a complex matter that depends on factors such as accessibility to the technology, nature and type of team, experience of the team, and task to be completed (Brown et al. 2007). Team members from

different disciplines always deal with conflicting demands and loyalties hence, their different perceptions provide greater organizational learning and synergy. This is reinforced by the fact that understanding the perspective of another team member is always difficult, and so the difficulty can be extended to the virtual environment due to the high potential of diversity. However, according to Berry, (2011), cultural diversity elements are usually hidden in computerized communication unless intentionally revealed.

Types of Virtual Teams

The obvious distinction between virtual and physical teams is that the former is electronically or computer mediated. Thus, virtual teams can fall into four groups which according to Berry, (2011), are: same time and place interfaces just like physical communication; same time and different place interfaces like instant messaging; different time but same place interface like in a chat room; and different time and place such as e-mail communications.

The listed groups show that most teams have an element of virtuality in them. For instance, physical interaction teams may use electronic technologies to send minutes after a meeting. Hence, classification of virtual teams in this system is attractive since almost all teams use some form of physical and computer-aided communication in their exchanges (Pantelli & Tucker 2009). The system also supports the difficulties that most communication channels have, specifically in configuration of team members. It also reduces the propensity of making blatant contrasts of the various types of team exchanges, as if virtual communication is a specific type of exchange easily analysed.

Merits and Demerits of Virtual Teams

According to De Pillis and Furumo, (2007), virtual teams are very useful as they provide ways in which organizations can bridge time and space. The same author also asserts that virtual teams are normally cost-efficient and usually provide ways of better usage of a distributed human resource. The teams can function all day when using electronic communication because some teams in certain locations can work on some tasks at different times. The teams also enable organizations to spread internationally while sustaining effective contact with customers and employees (De Pillis & Furumo 2007).

Team performance is also easier to document and review when using virtual teams because all exchanges are electronically and automatically recorded (Saonee et al. 2007). Processes that are asynchronous are seen to be very productive because participation of team members is in parallel as opposed to serially (common in physical interactions).

Similarly, virtual teams are the only alternative for removal of teams in an organization since they amplify or reduce the benefits of traditional team work. Virtual Teams are customized and managed to look for talent and expertise internationally so as problems and tasks can be completed daily. Conversely, if the teams are poorly managed and customized, the synergy may be weak resulting to failure, and non-existent output. Therefore, conditions for effective virtual teams are a must.

Possibility of negative outcomes when working with virtual teams is a reality. Lipnack and Stamps, (2000), in their study asserted that virtual teams shared less information that physically linked teams. Therefore, co-workers

would end up understanding less of the expected results, which decreases performance levels in an organization. Furthermore, internal organizational priorities often interfere with the performance of team members (Malhotra et al. 2007). The virtual task might become less of a priority, completed only when other regular responsibilities are dealt with. Hence, the management of virtual teams is required to highlight the work trends of team members or risk making virtual tasks less visible, important, and urgent.

The virtual team is also dependent on competent members; thus if they are lazy, and unfocused, the whole team would perform poorly. The same is also associated with decreased communication efficiency. De Pillis and Furumo, (2007), show that 30% of all effective communication is dependent on non-verbal communication. Therefore, usage of computer-mediated communication systems is highly dependent on verbal communication styles. This can lead to assumptions or ignorance during interactions which ultimately lead to unexpected outcomes in organizations. Lastly, it has been noticed that virtual teams are very sensitive to poor leadership and management. Virtual managers are seen to be poor communicators and motivators, which makes them resort to micromanagement. Micro-management has been proven to result in failure since team members are suffocated, and cannot produce the maximum effort to complete tasks (Brandt et al. 2007).

Recommendations for future development

Technologies that are reliable are also essential, which would function effectively with aspects such as suitable human resource policies. The appropriate human resource policies that should be integrated into the

virtual team technology is proper training and team member development, development of an organizational culture, and a leadership style that would recognize the virtual teams. The policies are also essential in traditional teams hence the reason that both teams require management time and effort.

It is also important for organizations to design activities that allow co-workers to know each other. This would diffuse the demerit of inability of building meaningful relationships seen on virtual teams. This can be done in three goals which are: ensuring that every member on the team can operate the technology, develop clear targets of all team members, and team building through personal knowing games.

It is also important for virtual team members to be more explicit to remove ambiguity in technological communication, which is brought about by absence of non-verbal cues. The team members should be obliged to define their work processes clearly and converse ideas more plainly than members of physical teams. For instance, reusable scripts can be used in tasks that involve negotiations or risk assessments. Lastly, it is recommended that virtual teams to look for ways to prioritize tasks. This is because the teams now lack appropriate systems necessary for understanding and prioritizing tasks.

Conclusions

Virtual teams are being implemented in both large and small scale organizations. They are also used as substitutes of traditional teams that interacted face-to-face. Virtual teams are determined by the degree in which the use technologically-mediated systems. Hence, they are categorized as:

same time and place interfaces; same time and different place interfaces; different time but same place interface; and different time and place. However, they are associated with advantages and disadvantages which must be noted in designing a virtual team for a specific organization. The advantages of virtual teams are that they save on time, enable organizations easily spread internationally, easier documentation and review of communications, and replace physical teams which hinder leadership. On the other hand the demerits of virtual teams are that they decrease communication efficiency since they are dependent on verbal cues, decrease workers cohesion and satisfaction, and dependent on competent workers.

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