



VIRTUAL TEAMS

When working remotely from one's colleagues, whether that be from home, from another office or location, or from another country or continent, the advantages can be more than offset by difficulties and misunderstandings.

When people work in the same place, there is a shared social system and the ability to overcome potential problems by informal exchanges and face-to-face communication. It allows people to get away with less than best practice.

People working remotely do not have the luxury of this shared social system or opportunities for informal contact to paper over the cracks. They cannot afford to work at anything less than best practice with a structured and planned approach to their working process. Too often, virtual working is adopted without any thought to the processes and supporting technologies. The difficulties and tensions then surface and result in poor performance and extra costs.

Research in 32 organisations highlighted the following key issues:

- Shared goals, clear roles and regular performance feedback are critical and need to be explicit.
- Standards and processes (e.g. speed of response) need to be agreed at the outset.
- Communications media need to be used for specific purposes – email for simple tasks where there is less danger of misunderstanding, richer media for complex tasks and for negotiations.

University of Sheffield/Pearl Kandola

Looking at communications, it has often been held that virtual teams should use face-to-face meetings and communication whenever possible – and this is certainly important to build initial trust and cohesion when the team members are new to each other.

A recent study of successful virtual work groups has even found that they can be more productive and more effective than face-to-face teams by blurring the distinction between time in meetings and time away from them through the use of online team rooms. Also known as virtual work spaces, these are networked, file-sharing spaces that provide a place for team members to access the latest versions of files at any time, carry on asynchronous discussions (without getting side-tracked into multiple conversations), and keep track of deadlines and time lines.

Team rooms free up the teams from having to update one another at every phone call. Instead, the teleconferences are used for decision making and airing differences of opinion. And the lack of non-verbal cues is actually seen as a boon to productivity by team members; people feel compelled to articulate their views more precisely when not depending on visual clues. Virtual meetings are also more democratic than face-to-face discussions; participants don't feel the effect of hierarchy as much and tend to contribute more.

Getting the communication processes right is even more important when different cultures are present in the team – and virtual teams make it easier to use people from different backgrounds. The media needs to be culturally sensitive and the standards and processes need to also reflect the cultural differences, e.g. what constitutes a decision being made. Diversity is both an opportunity and a potential pitfall.

The virtual team needs to agree its processes and the roles and responsibilities of its members – which need to be continually monitored and reviewed, with the leader facilitating clarity of expectations across the team. Then the goal can be reached.

Three principles seem to underpin success:

1 Exploit diversity: having representation from all markets or being able to choose a range of skills is a real opportunity – as long as the team pays attention to the differences. Interestingly, working remotely seems to facilitate more detailed and careful conversations that work hard to go beyond tacit agreement.

2 Using technology appropriately: virtual workspaces and instant messaging (IM) most closely simulate reality and are the most effective communication media. (Many teams reported setting up their own IM system when their organisations were still trying to decide whether to have a system or how to regulate it). The 'usual' media such as e-mail and video-conferencing does not rate highly in effectiveness. E-mail is too open to misunderstandings and prone to overuse. Video-conferences are still too fuzzy and restricted by availability to be of much use.

3 Hold it together: leaders use a vast range of techniques to draw the team together. Highest on the list is constant contact – team leaders rarely let a day pass without a communication to and between members. Other techniques include establishing common languages and glossary of terms; blending different working practices; pairing team members; contact and negotiation with the team members' home offices to avoid conflicts of priority.

From a distance, C. Axtell et al., People Management, 25 March 2004

The challenge of the virtual team, David Clutterbuck, Training Journal, August 2004

Let's start meeting like this, Edward Prewitt, CIO Magazine, July 2004

Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger, Ann Majchrzak et al., HBR May 2004

Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations ...

- ✂ “In order to live happily and free, you may have to sacrifice boredom. It is not always an easy sacrifice.” *Richard Bach*
- ✂ ‘Poor communication’ is a euphemism for ‘I don’t like what you are saying’.
- ✂ “It’s not the hours you put into your work that count – it’s the work you put into the hours.” *Sam Ewing*
- ✂ “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” *Eleanor Roosevelt*
- ✂ “You can judge your age by the amount of pain you feel when you come in contact with a new idea” *Pearl S. Buck*
- ✂ “Let me drop everything and work on your problem.” *Seen on a T-shirt worn by Chainsaw, a groupie to Melissa Etheridge*
- ✂ “Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death.” *Anais Nin*
- ✂ “When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change.” *Wayne Dyer*
- ✂ “There is no electronic substitute for the occasional exchange of pheromones.” *Ursula Hows*
- ✂ “Home working is about the work produced not ‘what are they up to’” *Tim Dwelley & Yvonne Bennion*
- ✂ “Do or do not. There is no ‘try’” *Yoda in Star Wars.*
- ✂ “When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.” *Helen Keller*
- ✂ “Management is to do with planning and organising something. Leadership is to do with creating that thing in the first place” *John Kotter*
- ✂ “To be effective, organisations need people with a healthy disrespect for the boss.” *Manfred Kets de Vries*
- ✂ “How can you get the best out of your employees? Expect the best.” *J Sterling Livingston*

Retaining talent

Beverly Kaye’s new book ‘Love It, Don’t Leave It: 26 Ways To Get What You Want at Work’ identifies some interesting facts about retaining staff.

When asked why people stayed with a company, the top five reasons were:

- 1 They stay for learning and growth. ‘If I’m learning and being challenged and everyday I have to do something slightly different, I stay.’
- 2 If they see their careers being developed.
- 3 They stay because they work with some great people. Leaving those great people is hard.
- 4 They stay if they are working with a great boss: a boss who supports and respects them.
- 5 They stay for pay: a pay that is fair and competitive.

An interesting insight she found is that pay is never initially high on the scale. It is driven up the scale if those other things aren’t there. Pay gets more important the less I have of the other factors.

What she also found in her research for the book was that people tend to leave before they’ve checked out what is possible inside their current company. She divides employees into two camps: opportunity whiners, and opportunity miners. The whiners are those who whine about not enough opportunity. They say that the boss didn’t tell them. They didn’t get feedback. They complain and they wait. Those people get aggravated easily. The opportunity miners say that if there is a way, it’s up to me. No one is going to do it for me. I have to ask for what I want and I have to take care of myself.

She also argues that while you’re busy trying to close competency gaps, some of your best people are thinking about “jumping ship, throwing in the towel, opening a yoghurt stand. They know there must be greener grass – out there – somewhere.” So managers should focus their coaching to close employees’ satisfaction gaps as well as (instead of?) competence gaps:

“What about your job makes you jump out of bed in the morning? If you were to win the lottery and resign, what would you miss the most? If you could go back to a job or organisation in your past and stay for an extended period of time, where would it be and why? Which of your job tasks would you like to do more of?”

www.LoveItDontLeaveIt.com

How much does it really cost to send an email!

This latest anti-Microsoft story is currently doing the rounds. I don’t know of it’s authenticity, but I have seen a number of very similar emails sent in private and public sector organisations, with similar lack of attention to cost and effect...

Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer emailed staff to outline a number of changes within the company as well as more general points about product lines, marketing developments and a need for everybody within the company just to ‘pull their socks up’.

Amongst the proposed cost-savings was the axing of free fizzy drinks machines in favour of water coolers.

This email weighed in at around 4,000-plus words. So, assuming it takes around five hours to write 4,000 words and about 30 minutes to read and understand, some interesting sums can be developed:

For example, it would have cost Bill Gates around \$114,000 to read it.

During the half hour that 55,000 Microsoft staff would spend reading it, Microsoft will have turned over \$1.8m.

Even using an average hourly rate of \$32 it would cost \$2.64m in wages for the 30 minutes staff were reading it.

And there is the cost of Steve Ballmer’s time in writing it...

It begs the question: How much cola were these guys drinking?

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