

Virtual Teams: Vital Success Factors

Virtual teams and remote working programmes are now an established part of the corporate landscape and offer huge benefits to companies who manage them successfully. Virtual or remote working can save significant amounts of time and money, and provides companies with the flexibility to harness the right talent for the right projects, and to 'follow the sun', offering availability to clients anywhere in the world at any time of day or night.

Challenges Of Virtual Team Working

However, it is frequently cited that more than 50% of global virtual teams fail to meet their objectives. This is hardly surprising as working with colleagues who are not co-located and communicating via technology is not the natural way of working for most of us human beings, particularly for those from relationship-focused cultures where communication tends to be less direct and more reliant on non-verbal cues.

Whether virtual or face-to-face, teams by their nature require interaction and collaboration; team members share ideas and information, support each other and cover each other's work. This all requires good working relationships between team members, harder to establish when individuals have rarely or sometimes never met face-to-face. The absence of informal conversation over lunch or coffee, those water cooler moments, or a shared joke on the way out of the office at the end of the day, makes it much harder for virtual team members to form a bond and to build that sense of 'we' that will support them through challenging projects.

'It can be a bit lonely sometimes, and sometimes I can feel like I am working in a vacuum.'

Partnerships Manager, Consumer Association

Without good relationships it can be harder to build trust between team members. Trust forms the glue that binds a virtual team together and higher levels of trust lead to improved knowledge sharing, increased innovation, a greater sense of commitment and more openness to change. In virtual teams trust is less likely to develop organically and teams need to dedicate time, attention and

specific protocols to ensuring trust is fostered, such as through training or coaching initiatives.

Undoubtedly the biggest challenge facing teams is communication; how, when, who with, how often to communicate. Getting the communication right is not only about investing in collaborative technologies, but also means developing soft skills and understanding individuals' differing communication needs and styles. Creating opportunities for informal communication across the team, as well as ensuring that the right information gets to the right people at the right time, is essential.

'I miss the lack of interaction and easy exchange of ideas.'

European Sales Manager, IT Company

The Cost Of Getting It Wrong

'Take a typical team, make it virtual and expect trouble'.

Lipnack and Stamps (2000)

Poor relationships, a lack of meaningful communication and an absence of trust can lead to a significant drop in effectiveness and an increased delay in meeting deadlines. A 2005 Deloitte study of IT projects outsourced to virtual work groups found that 66% failed to satisfy the clients' requirements. We have all heard the negative stories about endless online meetings where a couple of people dominate and everyone else is busy checking their emails or doing something else. Apparently 90% of audio conference participants multi-task during meetings.** We know about the missed deadlines, low morale, poor communication leading to unnecessary work, email messages that cause misunderstanding or offence. This can be the reality of working as part of a virtual structure with the end result that time and money are wasted, employees become disengaged and demotivated, projects fail to deliver and clients are disappointed.

The Benefits Of Getting It Right

But it's not all bad news. It has been widely acknowledged that in addition to offering cost savings through reduced travel, office space and local recruitment campaigns, when managed properly, virtual teams can actually out-perform co-located teams. A recent Stanford study suggested a 13% increase in productivity when employees work remotely. But the mistake can be to assume that the

same management tools, guidelines and communication protocols that work for co-located teams will be effective with geographically dispersed teams.

Investment in time, planning and soft skills training can create extremely positive outcomes for virtual teams. Strong relationships where team members communicate freely, provide support and trust each other's motivations can be developed. Team members can learn from each other and maximise the opportunities of working in a culturally diverse team. Online meetings can be just as, if not more, efficient than face-to-face meetings. And projects can be delivered on time and on budget with no impact on client satisfaction.

A flexible virtual team working structure can also mean significant improvements in employee engagement, leading to improved staff retention – and its associated cost savings. When managed well, many employees appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with, and learn from, the best talent in their organisation from across the globe and to gain all-important international experience. Those employees working remotely from their home appreciate the flexibility that remote working offers and the ability to really focus on important tasks without distractions.

How Training Helps

Many companies focus on the time and space challenges of virtual working and invest heavily in technology. However, the human challenges of virtual working are all too often neglected, with one recent survey* reporting that only approximately 16% of virtual employees at large multinationals received any training to prepare them for this new way of working.

Training that focuses on the human elements of virtual team working enables team members to understand, manage and adapt to the intercultural and interpersonal differences in working styles and expectations, as well as identifying their own patterns and preferences. Participants also learn practical tools to communicate more effectively, manage conflict and build better relationships.

Example 1

A recent virtual training programme brought together scientific R&D

team members in the UK and Italy to help them to understand each other's working styles and to establish new and more effective ways of working and communicating together. A major challenge for this team had been when and how to communicate, and how to share relevant information appropriately. Prior to the training, British team members had found their Italian colleagues to be secretive and felt that they withheld important project information. Training helped both nationalities to understand each other's communication style and how to break down negative perceptions in order to work more effectively together.

Example 2

A large global investment bank brought together finance team members from Europe and Asia for a series of virtual training workshops. The delegates were able to experience the trainer demonstrating best practice virtual communication, and had the opportunity to build their relationships with colleagues through learning more about each other's culture and work style preferences, and through a greater understanding of the local and cultural challenges that each group faced.

Example 3

European and Indian project team members at a global health care firm recently attended a two part virtual training programme to help them work more effectively with their colleagues who they mostly had never met in person. The first part gave each cultural group a grounding in the other culture and an awareness of the impact of their own behaviours. The second part brought both groups together and enabled colleagues to share and breakdown perceptions and to establish shared values, communication protocols and a new 'third' way of working.

Example 4

In another case, a British brand manager responsible for teams throughout southern Europe learnt how to build relationships more effectively through email communication and reported a much more positive response from his virtual direct reports since attending training.

Tangible Outputs

In addition to increasing their knowledge, building awareness and developing new skills, intact teams can leave training with a practical

team charter and action plan to implement into their daily work. These can include new communication protocols with easy wins such as the use of video or email guidelines, as well as commitments to each other in terms of response times or knowledge sharing.

Example 5

Managers of a pharmaceutical company from locations throughout North America and Europe attended a series of virtual training workshops. They were able to share best practice, test out new tools, and discuss communication models, and they also took away a list of ideas and suggestions that could be added to organisation-wide project set up documents and communication charters.



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Cathy is a
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Established for more than 50 years, the Farnham Castle team, together with our worldwide network of global cultural experts have gained an unrivalled reputation for helping international companies develop cross-cultural workforce solutions that support international business growth.

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* *RW3 Virtual Teams Report 2012*

** *Raindance Communications 2004*

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