Challenges Faced By Virtual Teams

Building and maintaining *trust* – with less interpersonal interaction and greater need for self-reliance, it's hard for virtual team members to trust one another.

Creating *synergy* – when people don't spend time with one another, it's difficult for them to connect with one another. It's even harder for their manager to encourage that bonding take place.

Battling *isolation* – many virtual team members (including managers) work along in home offices, or in remote company offices. Isolation can make a team member feel out of the loop and can create social problems that are hard to assess (because you can't see them) and address (because it's harder to connect on a personal level)

Collaborative processes – managers need to adapt their management style and establish new ways to encourage and monitor group processes. Virtual team members are required to be independent thinkers and self-starters. Sometimes that means they'll try to do everything themselves.

Assessing *performance* – When employees are scattered around the globe, it's hard to see when they're neglecting their work. It's also hard to see when they're performing above and beyond their duties. This makes it difficult to detect and address performance problems or to reward excellence. Virtual team managers must establish reliable quantitative and qualitative measures for accurate performance assessment.

Cultural Concerns

Successful virtual team members learn to cope with different national, corporate, and vocational cultures. As a member of a team working across borders, members must prepare themselves for the likelihood that they will be confronted with all kinds of dilemmas, ranging from cultural to social to environmental to ethical. There are a number of elements that reflect the cultural diversity of a team. Here, we will briefly address two areas of particular concern for virtual team members: language and time; addressing these areas can increase both team performance and motivation.

Language - verbal, nonverbal, and technology mediated – will certainly have an effect on the communication between team members of complex projects. Differences in communication style may affect knowledge-sharing and other goals of meetings, both real and virtual. In some ways, language is also among the most "cultural" aspects of human behavior, meaning it is transmitted largely through enculturation, mostly unconsciously or tacitly (Baba, 1998). Socio-culturally complex projects, global projects, and technology mediated projects, can assume highly complex linguistic structures. Although the team may operate exclusively in English, an awareness of linguistic complexity may prepare members to understand communication issues that may emerge over the course of a project. There are several reasons to take the time to familiarize yourself with the linguistic environment in which you are operating (Baba, 1998):

- To express (and develop) an interest in your team members.
- To appreciate the potential for cultural misunderstanding.
- To recognize where, along a complex chain from production to consumption, there may be communication "bottlenecks."
- To appreciate global diversity.

Time – scheduling and perceptions. Virtual team members scattered around the globe will be operating in different time zones. While one member is ending her day, another may just be starting his day. It's important to accommodate team members in different time zones so that no member is consistently having to be on a conference in the middle of the night, for example. While it's important to work out overlapping core working hours, it will help to change meeting times periodically.

Obviously, time is important in business in general and virtual teams in particular.   So the cultural construction of time is a particular challenge to working on projects across cultures and geographies. Edward Hall (n.d.) argues that time is not a universal, not an absolute, but is experienced and displayed (performed) differently in different cultures.

According to Hall time is largely subconscious and taken for granted. Therefore exposure to alternative conceptions of time may cause culture shock. For example, what does a delay in answering a communication mean in the US?

- A backlog of work - large volume of business
- Poor organisation
- Technical difficulties
- Lack of interest - low priority
- I would add, absolute confidence in the relationship – you are dealing with a true ally who will forgive you for the lapse.

In other cultures, the same delay may indicate high priority.   For example, in Ethiopia, the time required for a decision is directly proportional to its importance. This is so much the case that low-level bureaucrats there have a way of trying to elevate the prestige of their work by taking a long time to make up their minds (Manrai & Manrai, 1995).

In the Arab East, time does not generally include schedules as Americans know and use them. The time required to get something accomplished depends on the relationship. More important people get fast service from less important people, and conversely. Close relatives take absolute priority; nonrelatives are kept waiting (Manrai & Manrai, 1995).

Rewards

Lastly, to create a truly synergistic team, it's important to ensure that individual team members benefit from participating in virtual teams. This can be done in several ways (Hoefling, 2003).

Virtual reward ceremonies - when a team succeeds make everyone a part of it. Celebrating doesn't have to be expensive: a box of chocolate, silly toys, or a team t-shirt mailed to each remote team member can stand in place of an in-office party

Recognize individual achievements at the start of each virtual meeting

Ensure that each team member's "real location" boss aware of the members contribution.

In collocated teams, people each lunch together, or just chat. Virtual teams form friendships too, but it may be harder for "off topic chat" to happen. Picking up the phone to call a colleague can serve this same function.