



## **Chapter I**

# **The Multifaceted Nature of Virtual Teams**

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## **Abstract**

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*Despite their growing popularity in organizations, our understanding of virtual teams is still at an embryonic stage. As of today, the term “virtual team” has been loosely defined in the academic press, and empirical findings have been generalized across all types of virtual teams. Based on an extensive review of the literature and a series of in-depth interviews with more than 40 experienced virtual team members and leaders, we identified the key characteristics of virtual teamwork as well as those characteristics that distinguish among various virtual team configurations. We posit that researchers must now adopt a multidimensional view of virtual teams in order to adequately compare empirical findings, build a cumulative tradition*

*in this field of research, and provide practitioners with a framework to help them manage virtual teams effectively. Researchers and practitioners must not only recognize the diversity of possible virtual team arrangements but also identify strategies and draw lessons that are contingent upon particular virtual team configurations.*

## Introduction

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Today, virtual teams are considered to be the answer to many organizational problems (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Haywood, 1998; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). Advances in information technology, coupled with competitive pressures, led to the increasing use of virtual teams for such diverse activities as product development, customer care, systems design and programming, strategic program implementation, and building design and construction. Their growing popularity attracted the attention of researchers in information systems and organizational behavior. Despite the fact that research on this topic is blooming, our understanding of the virtual team phenomenon is still at an embryonic stage, and there is much to learn about such teams before we can fully reap their potential benefits (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Cramton, 2001; Furst, Blackburn, & Rosen, 1999; Saunders, 2000). Most of the early writing on virtual teams focused on their impacts, or *why* they should be used (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Saunders, 2000). But as organizations increasingly grasp the reasons for adopting virtual teams, the research focus must shift to issues related to *how* they can be effectively used and managed (Saunders, 2000). Because of the differences between traditional and virtual teams, what we know about managing traditional teams<sup>2</sup> may or may not apply to virtual ones (Saunders, 2000).

To begin looking at this issue, we conducted an extensive literature review on virtual teams. Two related problems were immediately apparent. First, we found that the term “virtual team” has been loosely defined and used by researchers in several fields of study. As an example of this, McDonough, Kahn, and Barczak (2001) defined virtual teams as “comprised of individuals who have a moderate level of physical proximity and are culturally similar” and global teams as “comprised of individuals who work and live in different countries and are culturally diverse” (p. 111). According to these authors, global teams are distinct from virtual teams. But are not global teams a particular form or configuration of virtual teams? In this chapter, we attempt to clarify this issue.

Furthermore, while several authors acknowledge that virtual teams are intrinsically different and that various virtual team configurations exist (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Cramton, 2001; Jackson, 1999), conclusions are commonly

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