



Chapter IV

A Virtual Team in Action: An Illustration of a Business Development Virtual Team

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Abstract

Examined in this chapter are the characteristics of a project-based virtual team. Although there is some empirical research on virtual teams, little research has focused on describing the practical application of a virtual team in the organizational environment. Described in the chapter are the task and goals of the team, how it handled virtual challenges and used information technology to bridge distance, and how it functioned within its organization. Specifically, the task of the team, team composition, team beliefs, team processes, organizational context, and the effectiveness of the team are described. The chapter is concluded with a summary of characteristics of successful virtual teams.

Introduction

Virtual teamwork is a new approach for people in organizations working together on projects and in research. New pressures facing organizations have led many to use virtual teams (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001). The need to compete in a rapidly changing, hypercompetitive, and global marketplace is prompting many organizations to transform their organizational structures from large, hierarchical structures to agile, flexible, new structures (Morris, Marshall, & Rainer, 2001). These teams, in which team members work together from dispersed locations, are appearing in all types of organizations in various sectors. There is some empirical research on virtual teams, however, little research has focused on describing the practical application of a virtual team in the organizational environment. Therefore, it is the goal of this chapter to examine and describe the characteristics of one such project-based virtual team. Described in this chapter are the task and goals of the team, how it handled virtual challenges, and how it functioned within its organization.

The content in this chapter is taken from interviews with team members of the virtual team and their business sponsor. Team members were interviewed, either face-to-face or via the telephone using a semistructured interview method that typically lasted 1.5 h each. The company in which the illustrated virtual team operates is part of a large worldwide manufacturing organization with many locations, and all team members are employees of that organization. Therefore, this team is a geographically distributed intraorganizational (virtual) team.

The team was structured in such a way that there were two separate groups within the team. The first group (three people), called the leadership team, met regularly to discuss project progress, financial issues, etc. The second group, referred to as the project team, was made up of the rest of the team (five people) who were in the manufacturing, trials, and R&D functional areas. The entire team, therefore, had eight team members, with one external business sponsor. The team was dispersed across the Eastern part of North America, with the distance between the farthest two locations being approximately 2300 km. Two people were located in each of the first three of the locations, and one person was located in each of the last two (see Figure 1). The locations were diversified in terms of the functional area of the organization. Leadership team members were located at Site 3 and Site 5. Several options existed for communicating with the team, including telephone and teleconferencing systems, e-mail, sharing information on electronic databases (i.e., Lotus Notes), and face-to-face meetings. Communication patterns are more fully described in the section, "Team Processes."

The rest of this chapter describes characteristics of the team's situation and identifies strengths and weaknesses that readers can use to inform their own

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