Chapter IX

Effective Virtual Teams

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Abstract

It is likely that employees will work on a virtual team at some point in their careers. However, it is questionable how effectively organizations, training, and technology support the needs of virtual teams. Organizations must communicate what collaborative and knowledge-sharing behaviors are expected, establish reward and recognition systems that reinforce those behaviors, ensure that employees have the skills and tools required to fulfill those expectations, and develop managers that role model and reinforce the desired behaviors. Collaborative technologies must also become more self-managing, provide more compelling asynchronous capabilities, and consider that individuals may be part of many teams, thereby requiring better data aggregation and visualization.

Introduction

The days of frequent face-to-face interaction appear to be a thing of the past. The notion of proximal teams and real-time interaction may no longer always be an option or be desired. As such, it is more likely that employees will work on a virtual team at some point in their careers. Yet, how well do organizations really support virtual team effectiveness? How well skilled are employees at working and building relationships virtually? How well do our virtual team leaders really lead? Does technology really support the way teams work or support the socioemotional needs of virtual teams?

Effectiveness can vary greatly from team to team. When there is no consistent and cohesive mechanism for driving practices, setting expectations, measuring performance, and developing and selecting technologies, teams find it difficult to function effectively as they work across organizations or in other boundary-spanning scenarios. Unless team members are intrinsically motivated to overcome challenges that inhibit effectiveness, they either continue with extremely frustrating experiences or function unproductively. Virtual teams need motivation, incentive, and the reduction of existing demotivating factors. Corporations that attempt to implement a virtual environment without understanding the drastically different context in which teams must exist will likely suffer frustration rather than reap the benefits virtuality can afford (Piccoli, 1999).

Being equipped with even the most advanced technologies is not enough to make a virtual team effective. Much attention must be paid to the overall introduction of the concept of virtual teams and the tools, processes, and organizational systems that support them (Boyett & Boyett, 2000; Hertel, 2002; Joinson, 2002; Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001; Piccoli, 1999). For example, information technology (IT) should not focus on designing or deploying collaborative technologies without understanding the various needs of teams and how they work (Bruck, 2000b; Jackson, 1999; Robb, 2002). Technologists should also place more focus on enabling more compelling asynchronous (different time/different place) interactions. As corporations become more global and the number of available synchronous time slots decrease, work and life balance issues will increase unless corporations start to make the shift to asynchronous work. Another significant area where focus is necessary in collaboration technologies is the need for seamless integration of key collaborative capabilities beyond the traditional portal paradigm. Technologies must consider that individuals may be part of many teams. Individuals need technologies that can help them manage their responsibilities and commitments to all teams from one place, which provides activity coherence and aggregation of data from a variety of sources.

Training should not focus only on how to use the features and functions (mechanics) of collaborative tools but should also include cognitive and social

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