Chapter 7.9
Removing Space and Time:
Tips for Managing the Virtual Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Virtual teams are become more and more popular as the world becomes more connected; furthermore, research is suggesting that virtual teams are as effective as face-to-face teams (Baker, 2002). This chapter compares and contrasts virtual teams with face-to-face teams in order to determine what differences exist as the workplace become virtual. It investigates how relationships between team members change when geographic boundaries are removed and how managers should adjust managerial styles when leading a virtual team. Also, a discussion of team dynamics—including the development of trust, team cohesion, and communication barriers—is included. Tips and techniques for developing an effective team are provided for virtual team managers.

INTRODUCTION

Picture it: you are home sitting in front of your laptop, sipping your coffee, wearing your favorite sweats—and you are *working*. Not only are you working, but you are managing a group of people all over the world who are also sitting in the comfort of their homes, working. You are part of a virtual team. What is a virtual team exactly? It is a traditional team without boundaries, one that uses multiple channels to communicate thoughts and ideas. Zaccaro and Bader (2003) say that it differs from a face-to-face (FTF) or traditional team in two ways:

First, members of these new forms of organizational teams either work in geographically separated work places, or they may work in the same space but at different times. Still other teams have members working in different spaces and time zones, as is the case with many multinational teams. The second feature is that most, if not all, of the interactions among team members occur through electronic communication channels. (p. 377)

The question is: how do these differences translate into changes in the way we work? And do these virtual teams work as well as traditional FTF teams? Baker (2002) says that virtual teams can be just as effective, and sometimes more effective, than traditional FTF teams. He stated that most of the empirical research on virtual teams reported no difference in the effectiveness between FTF teams and virtual teams; the author concludes that using the right collaborative technology would actually increase the effectiveness of virtual teams. Conversely, Lipnack and Stamps (2000) report that virtual teams have the same problems as FTF teams, only the problems of virtual teams are worse and perhaps more difficult to remedy. Virtual teams have been around since the mid-1980s and have been increasing in popularity over the past few years in industry (Baker, 2002; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003).

With this increase in popularity comes a significant amount of empirical research on virtual teams; however, most of this research has focused on comparing the effectiveness of FTF teams and virtual teams using some form of communication- mediated technology (CMTs) (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). While this information is helpful to corporations in making decisions to use virtual teams, little is known about how managers should operate within these teams. As a manager the focus is on getting the job done and keeping team members happy and working effectively. When the manager is physically in a

different place, how does their role change? With management in virtual teams, several immediate questions arise: As a manager, how does one deal with troubled (or even troublesome) employees when you cannot sit down and talk it out in a meeting? How do the team dynamics change? How does communication change? How does a manager know if their employees are actually working? Will virtual teams need extra time or warrant extra steps to manage? Finally, how does a manager build trust within a virtual team? All of these questions revolve around the same idea that is the objective of this chapter: what skills or characteristics are needed to be an effective manager in a virtual team?

BACKGROUND

Virtual teams are similar to traditional teams in that they involve a group of people working together toward a common goal. The two teams must both have a certain level of trust between team members, everyone must be committed towards completing the assigned task, and they all must look towards a manager or a leader to guide their process. The differences between the two, however, are tremendous. For one thing, even though a virtual team comprises components similar to those of the traditional team, virtual teams operate differently.

Virtual teams are made up of people potentially working all over the world. The team members work in different places and some may work at different times. This disconnectedness, in terms of physicality, may cause several communication barriers. Team members may easily become confused as to what another team member is saying; this confusion could even lead to conflict between employees. In order to make up for lack of physical connectedness, virtual teams use Communication-Mediated Technologies (CMTs) in order to stay in touch with one another. It is the power of these

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