

Chapter 63

Leadership in Globally Distributed Virtual Teams: Redefining the Qualities of an Effective Leader and Strategies for Effective Management

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce readers to various factors that can affect the management of international virtual teams. In examining this topic, the authors provide an overview of what each factor is, note how each factor can create problems in international virtual teams, and explain how effective management—or informed approaches to managing such teams—can help mitigate such challenges. The authors also provide readers/managers with foundational strategies that can facilitate the sharing of information and the creation of trust in international virtual teams.

INTRODUCTION

The international proliferation of information communication technologies (ICTs) has forever changed how organizations and individuals think about the workplace. Now, individuals can collaborate as easily with colleagues half way around the world as they can with counterparts just across

the hall. This leveling of traditional barriers of space and time has resulted in the rise of a new kind of work environment: the globally distributed virtual team.

Within this new structure, a company can use ICTs to assemble specialists from around the globe into a project team tasked with achieving a particular objective. Team members, moreover, never need to leave the nation in which they reside in order to engage in such activities. The result

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is a situation that can be tempting to employers and employees alike, but that can be problematic for those individuals tasked with managing such teams.

In truth, the convergence of technological and cultural issues facilitated by ICTs, and the speed and immediacy with which such interactions can happen, can lead to new problems that the managers of such teams need to anticipate and address if projects are to go smoothly. For these reasons, the individuals assigned to manage international virtual teams need to understand the factors that can affect interactions in this new work context. These managers can also benefit from strategies that address such factors and mitigate the problems that can emerge in this new virtual workplace context.

This chapter introduces readers to aspects that can affect the management of international virtual teams. The authors will overview such factors, note how each one can create problems in international virtual teams, and explain how effective management—or informed approaches to managing such teams—can help mitigate such challenges. The authors will also provide readers/managers with strategies for sharing information in and creating trust in international virtual teams—two factors that are essential to the effective operations of such collaborative entities.

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL TEAMWORK

Numerous authors have noted the advantages of using virtual teams within the context of today's global economy. These advantages include access to wider ranges of international talent/skilled labor, increased speed with which projects can be completed if distributed globally, and reduced cost associated with everything from utilities and office space to labor and transportation (Brewer, 2010; LaBrosse, 2008). Yet, like all new undertakings, the move to virtual teams is not without its

detriments—particularly when team members are drawn from different nations and cultures (Ang & Inkpen, 2008). For these reasons, those who manage such teams need to understand the various factors that can affect interactions and information exchange when using ICTs to coordinate the activities of individuals distributed across a range of nations and cultures.

Both team leaders and team members face numerous challenges when engaging in virtual work. Some of the challenges are similar to those faced by colocated teams. Both virtual and colocated teams, for example, face challenges related to communication and knowledge sharing during the life of a project. These challenges, however, are often heightened when team members must rely solely on computer-mediated communication technologies that do not allow for non-verbal cues and impromptu discussions. As a result, central aspects of communicating and building trust tend to disappear when professional interactions move to online environments (Daim et al., 2012; Huang, Kahai, & Jestice, 2010; Kimble, 2011).

In fact, the selection of appropriate technical tools for collaboration is one of the challenges faced by virtual teams (Brewer, 2010). And when such interactions take place in global contexts where issues of culture and language come into play, the complexities of managing team dynamics seem to multiply almost exponentially.

The primary challenges virtual teams face can be broken down into several broad categories:

- **Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Selection:** Are all involved parties using the same technologies—and versions of such technologies—to interact?
- **Relationship Building and the Development of Trust:** In a context where regular informal interaction among colleagues is limited, what activities help to create bonds of trust among members of virtual teams?

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