

Team–Work Issues in Virtual Teams

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INTRODUCTION

There has been much written about virtual organisations and virtual teams in the last five years. We have begun to research the shift in work organisation paradigms and structures, translating much of what we knew already about workgroups and teams in conventional workplaces into the new contexts, and adding some new issues and understandings into the mix. We may need to translate a little further to come to grips with the ‘virtual teams’ that are actually communities of practice (CoPs).

BACKGROUND

We have long known that all work groups are characterised and defined by their shared sense of time and task, if not place. Without the task and the interaction around that task, we have only a semi-random collection of individuals who happen to be in a particular space (temporally and/or geographically). A team is a very particular kind of group, where systematic contributions of different kinds from each of the members are required to complete the task (Tyson, 1998).

A workgroup may be less dependent on such contribution from each of the members and have some tolerance for members to be more passive and low-participative, provided they do not actually obstruct the progress on the shared task. Virtual work teams have been researched rather more than the more voluntary network of a CoP, and we are thus still learning how a CoP might manifest team issues, especially since some such communities are not virtual. The CoP does have a learning and sharing task, but it is often loosely defined, and so group cohesion is a more difficult process. Where the CoP is connected electronically rather than geographically co-located, then the dynamics are even more uncertain.

We have also known for a long time that when groups first form, they are typified by *ambiguity*. Members will ask themselves and perhaps each other whether they really wish to be in the group, whether they will get enough out of it, whether it will be worth their invested time, what it is all about anyway, if this CoP will really be able to share its collective knowledge, and so forth.

As the group begins to come together around the shared task, members may also sense a great deal of *ambivalence*. Becoming part of a group also means having to relinquish some aspects of one’s own individuality. Will members feel that they must go too much with the demands and directions of others? Will they really be able to be heard and to also draw from the group? Will they retain their individual identity and sense of self-worth, or will the group diminish them in some way? Can the group become a close-knit, fully functioning team without the individuals’ identities disappearing entirely? These are not foolish concerns and tend to simmer in each member’s mind at various points of a team’s formation and life.

As with all small groups, leadership issues will surface irrespective of what formal leadership arrangements and protocols have been put in place. The issue of *authority* pervades group interaction, whether they are face-to-face or remote. Members ask themselves who is in charge of this group, and test how the leader(s) will respond to certain interactions and challenges. Even when leadership and authority issues appear resolved comfortably, they are nonetheless present and potentially volatile if the task suddenly makes new demands on the group or team.

Dynamics of ambivalence, ambiguity, and authority inevitably generate some levels of *anxiety* in a group, and these will manifest in a variety of ways, ranging from withdrawal or tentativeness through to aggression and other dysfunctional behaviours (Wells, 1982; DeBoard, 1978; Hirschhorn, 1991). In a CoP,

many of these issues will be amplified by the factors of loose structure, low positional authority, and the potential for lack of task clarity. If a virtual team is ever to become an effective learning and sharing group, a true CoP, then the early formative stages are vital and must be given special attention. Hoefling (2001), Nemiro (2004), Pauleen (2004), Haywood (1998), and many others agree that the start-up, team-building stages of forming a virtual team are worthy of special attention, since if the cohesiveness of the virtual team is not established then, the group or CoP may never be fully functioning. In a CoP, given the voluntary nature of the exercise, these start-up issues require special attention from whomever holds the instigating leadership 'torch'. The protocols of communication, the clarification of the learning tasks, and so forth are all laid down in these early stages, or the loose connection of the virtual group rapidly become disconnected entirely.

FUTURE AND CONCLUSION

In essence, the key issues for virtual teams pivot around cohesion, communication, and enabling processes and technology. Within these broad bands are embedded issues of possible cultural diversity, trust and interpersonal connectedness, and creation of a working culture that both encourages creativity and yet permits honest assessment and reflection on progress and outcomes. Since the 'virtual' element reduces visual communication and pares down normal interpersonal cues, it is clear that all aspects of the team life are potentially more fragile and at risk of faltering. Accordingly, leadership and facilitation, however informal or shifting, are pivotal ingredients in the success of the virtual team.

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KEY TERMS

Group: A number of individuals who interact for purposes of addressing some shared purpose or task. This differentiates human collectives from random clusters of people who happen to be co-located, or who have no purpose which requires interaction.

Team: A defined group that intentionally combines its members' various skills and knowledge to undertake a shared task that requires them to coordinate their various efforts for satisfactory completion. Teams will normally have a defined leadership and authority structure, or define their own in order to address the task.

Virtual Organisation: A commercial or non-profit enterprise that does not exist as a tangible entity at a single location, nor even at multiple sites, but comprises networked nodes and individuals who are connected solely for the purpose of pursuing that enterprise.

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