

Chapter XI

Virtual Teams in Health Care: Maximising Team Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an in-depth analysis of the methods to increase the effectiveness of virtual teams in health care using the Northern Alliance Hospital Admission Risk Program (HARP) Chronic Disease Management (CDM) Program as the test case. A conceptual framework of the specific components required for virtual team effectiveness and a survey tool to examine a team's performance (based on virtual team member perception) with each of these components is presented. The proposed conceptual framework of virtual team effectiveness categorises the determinants influencing the effectiveness of virtual teams into four key frames of leadership, team components, organisational culture, and technology. An empirical survey of 38 virtual team members within the Northern Alliance HARP CDM Program demonstrates high levels of agreement with leadership and some team components, however, limited agreement with the organisational culture and technology components.

INTRODUCTION

In today's turbulent health care environment, characterised at one extreme by economic slowdown, and at the other, by actively involved and informed health care consumers, hospitals are confronting the fundamental business challenges of survival

and success (Yavas & Romanova, 2005). Leaders in health-care organisations are developing and implementing a variety of initiatives aimed at demonstrating enhanced value as they struggle to compete in a volatile market (Richardson & Gurtner, 1999). Teamwork is one of the most common proposals for managing increasing or-

ganisational complexity and as a lever for change (Drew & Coulson-Thomas, 1997).

Several authors have documented the potential contributions of teams for health-care organisations in enhancing continuous improvement of quality, innovation, and customer satisfaction; in improving employee satisfaction; reducing operating costs and in improving response to technological change (Chan, Pearson, & Entrekin, 2003). Other reported benefits of teamwork include breaking down the boundaries to effective communication and collaboration, increasing the speed of action and raising the level of commitment, creating a more customer-focussed culture and increasing organisational adaptability and flexibility (Drew et al., 1997). Moreover, Holton (2001) suggests that the productivity of a group of individuals is greater than the sum of the outputs of each individual.

The use of teams offers two major advantages to an organisation. Firstly, teamwork has the capacity to empower people to utilise their abilities. This has relevance for both motivation and group cohesiveness. Secondly, the use of teams allows managers to focus their attention on strategic issues rather than supervising individuals (Chan et al., 2003). The nature of teams has changed significantly as a result of changes in organisations and the nature of the work that they do. Organisations have become dispersed across geography and across industries (Kimball, 1997). Equally, the convergence of IT and communication and the advent of the Internet have impacted dramatically on almost every aspect of our life. Indeed, the Internet and WWW have been seen as the catalyst for radical change in organisation activities and processes. The digital world offers a borderless and virtual village where individuals, teams, and organisations are interconnected and interdependent through a network of partnerships and relationships (Zhao, 2006). This has seen the recent emergence and proliferation of virtual teams.

The primary objective of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the methods to increase the effectiveness of virtual teams in health care using the Northern Hospital Admission Risk Program Chronic Disease Management (HARP CDM) Alliance as a case study.

Based on an extensive review of the extant literature, the research develops and proposes a conceptual framework of the specific components required to maximise virtual team effectiveness, which can be used as a tool to examine a team's performance with each of these components (based on virtual team member perception). The major research question that this study proposes to answer is:

- How to maximise effectiveness of virtual teams in health care?

With ongoing changes in the health care environment terrain, characterised by a depleting workforce, funding constraints, rapid technological advancement, and increasingly, by actively involved and informed health care consumers, the evolution and proliferation of virtual teams has been recognised as an important issue affecting health care both at a local level and internationally. In order for hospitals and health care providers to provide a sustainable, responsive service, high quality, best practice, and patient centred-care, and to maintain a workforce of highly qualified and skilled staff, many health care organisations have adopted the model of virtual teams.

Therefore, this research is important with significant pragmatic value. The project offers a new solution or means of consideration of a globally relevant and increasingly common issue. It advances the current knowledge base about the specific factors influencing the effectiveness of virtual teams in health care. The project consolidates understanding of these factors and proposes a conceptual model. The conceptual model (derived from local and global research)

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