



Chapter 5

Meeting Current Challenges for Virtually Collocated Teams: Participation, Culture, and Integration

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INTRODUCTION¹

The term 'virtual team' is becoming increasingly more visible in the news media, due to recent trends of corporate mergers, global markets, and interdisciplinary teamwork. A number of different technologies are currently being tried out in the workplace to support both real-time and asynchronous communication and interaction. These technologies include more well-known support such as e-mail and audio-conferencing, as well as newer technologies such as desktop conferencing, media spaces, and chat.

The goal of this chapter is to describe certain challenges for teams who engage in virtually collocated work. Numerous challenges face these teams who are expected to perform as physically collocated teams: to provide deliverables, meet project schedules, and to generate feasible and even innovative problem solutions. And yet all this must be done at a distance. Team members stem from different departments, organizations, countries, and sometimes even competitor companies. Sometimes teams meet face-to-face on a regular basis, sometimes rarely, often not at all. How can team members be expected to be motivated to attend meetings, to develop trust, or even to adopt the technology when social pressures from a distance are weak?

Even management and technical support for these teams at the local level may also be weak; managers may consider such teams to be a part-time activity, and local sites may lack gurus, champions, or even compatible hardware.

In this chapter, I distinguish the topic of virtually collocated teams from a general discussion of the problems involved in distributed work. The key word of my argument is *teams*, and I will focus on how the development and sustainability of social processes in the group are affected by the use of technology. The challenges that these teams face are directly tied to the limitations that the technology imposes on the communication of relevant social information, believed to be essential to the effectiveness of teams.

It is widely believed that a well-functioning team needs to forge common goals, working procedures, and rules of interaction. Researchers are accumulating evidence that suggests that the ability of a distributed team to function depends on such factors, and not only on the capability of the technology to enable communication and data-exchange. In the next sections, I describe the role of interaction in developing perceptions of membership of a social/working group and explain challenges that arise when teams do not have the opportunity to meet face-to-face often during their formation process. I illustrate these challenges with examples found in virtual meeting interaction. I then discuss future directions for technology development and social research to support virtually collocated work.

DEVELOPING AS A “WELL-FORMED” VIRTUAL TEAM

My hypothesis in this chapter is that limitations due to technology and distance make it difficult for geographically distributed teams to develop certain social processes in order to function as a “well-formed” team. However, a “well-formed” team, especially one that is geographically distributed, is hard to define. Originally Lewin (1948) proposed that a group becomes a social system when members’ goals and their means to attain these goals become interdependent. Rabbie and Horwitz (1988) elaborate on this idea by adding that not only is the perceived interdependence of individual members essential to forming a group, but they must also experience a common fate. However an alternative view by Tajfel and Turner (1986) explains that members can still perceive themselves as a group even though their goals may not be interdependent. Rather, the process of emphasizing and defining social category differences defines a group for individuals.

Interaction among group members facilitates perceptions of interdependence or distinct social categorizations for the group. Most investigations of

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