

# Chapter 19

## “In the Office”: Communication in Virtual Environments

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### ABSTRACT

*Using Smarthinking, Inc. as a case study, effective instant messaging is explored as a viable communication option for organizations, specifically virtual organizations, to decrease the feelings of isolation that telecommuters experience. Instant messaging is used to create a virtual team, thereby allowing its members to develop feelings of camaraderie and maintain and/or increase productivity while creating a virtual-organizational culture. In addition, the advantages and disadvantages of instant messaging are addressed from the perspective of the employees and the organization. Finally, the logistics of incorporating instant messaging into a virtual organization, from developing instant messaging guidelines and policies to encouraging effective synchronous communications, are examined.*

### INTRODUCTION

More corporations are allowing their employees to work remotely, yielding the possibility of nearly nineteen million telecommuters by 2021 (Cox, 2009) and modifying the notion of the physical building, the “brick and mortar” corporate headquarters, with its traditional satellite locations. In a similar vein, more and more businesses are

delivering their products and services solely via Internet-based technologies, including online education companies, online publishing houses, and similar organizations offering online goods and services. With this in mind, it is important to evaluate how synchronous communication can not only effectively transmit information but also allow colleagues to collaborate and contribute in real-time and serve as both valuable and productive members of a team.

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## ***“In the Office”***

Virtual workplace environments in which co-workers may be scattered throughout the nation or the world need to incorporate synchronous communications that can enhance interactions between co-workers to a level that is at least as effective as face-to-face interactions. In pursuit of this goal, Smarthinking, Inc., a virtual education organization which aggregates hundreds of geographically-diverse employees to deliver 24/7 online tutoring and academic support to students and higher education institutions, determined that synchronous interactions would benefit both the employees and the organization as a whole. Although Smarthinking’s physical corporate offices in Washington, DC house a small team of employees, the vast majority of employees work around the globe, from any location with computer and Internet access. These employees log in to Smarthinking’s online tutoring application to provide real-time and asynchronous tutoring assistance to students from client institutions. Hence, large “shifts” of online tutors are working at any given time of day—even if the corporate office is closed—requiring a reliable form of communication among employees. Although organizations with virtual workforces may agree that communication is critical to developing an effective team, many of these organizations rely on synchronous communications outside of the virtual environment, such as conference calls (with or without video) or asynchronous communications within the environment, such as email, to conduct business-related activities. While email can certainly be beneficial in relaying information and in assisting in the collaboration between team members (Oldroyd, 2007), it typically lacks the speed and fluidity of a verbal conversation, especially since long periods of time can elapse between email transmissions. Telephone conversations, on the other hand, do invite users to actively participate in a dialogue, but such telecommunications often require participants to step outside the virtual workplace to do so. Furthermore, scheduling

telephone conversations becomes difficult when users reside in different time zones. Chat-based instant messaging, however, offers its users the opportunity to engage in a real-time, continuous conversation within the virtual workspace. This further positions users to multi-task with both online communications and other assigned tasks, enabling them to maintain productivity levels. Instant messaging also allows users to collaborate on a project in real time (Reinig, 2009) and can mimic a face-to-face exchange by offering “near-synchronous communication...presence awareness...[and] high-profile notifications” (Garrett, 2007). Additionally, Internet chats fulfill the psychological need for real-time interaction with others, thus potentially decreasing the feelings of loneliness and isolation that many virtual employees experience. Furthermore, instant messaging offers skilled users a practical way to exchange information, thereby creating a sense of being “in the office” with others in the organization. Regularly using this form of synchronous communication can create a unique, efficient, and productive culture within the virtual organization, one that benefits the individual employees and the entire organization.

This chapter will examine the importance, the reasoning, and the impact of synchronous communication in virtual environments by evaluating effective synchronous interactions between colleagues. Drawing on the authors’ experiences of managing a large online team of employees, this chapter will offer a greater understanding of how real-time interactions can bolster levels of camaraderie and productivity in the virtual workplace.

## **Background**

It is estimated that ninety-five percent of employees will be using instant messaging by 2013 (“IM Workplace Use Here to Stay,” 2008) as individuals from multiple geographic areas, time zones, and nationalities converge in virtual workplaces

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