Chapter 1
Virtual Teaming in Online Education:
Does It Work?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global economy has given rise to the concept of virtual teaming in which team members work without the boundaries of space and time, both within and outside the confines of a single organization, in order to compete in an ever-changing business environment. This case raises questions as to the efficiency and effectiveness of virtual teaming by examining survey responses from 128 online MBA students who were required to work on virtual project teams as part of the class requirements. The vast majority of the students (84%) were in the 21-40 year old age range and tended to have a high comfort level (99%) with the Learning Management System (LMS) utilized by the academic institution. Using a survey method with both Likert-style options and open response items, the authors explore the major causes that may impact the success of working and learning on teams that cross time and distance barriers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historically, many processes that occur in the business world are mimicked in a more controlled environment within universities, colleges, and other academic institutions. This enables researchers to better understand the factors that impact the success of those processes in order to help business organizations move forward competitively. Virtual teaming, a term that refers to teams whose members are geographically dispersed thereby making face-to-face communication difficult, is just one of the processes that have been embraced by academic institutions, not only in their empirical research programs, but also in advancing their own teaching methodology beyond that of the bricks and mortar classroom. By arming students with the skills and knowledge needed to be productive members of virtual team projects, they are able to bring these same skills back to their workplaces (Clark & Gibb, 2006; Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1993; Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995). Indeed, employers have an expectation that business school graduates will have attained the ability to work with a group and rank this as one of the most important attributes they look at during the hiring process (Chapman, et al., 2009). This case explores the advantages and disadvantages of virtual teaming in an online class environment. By highlighting some of the frustrations of working in virtual teams, as well as those areas that provide satisfaction to the students, it is hoped that these results can be analyzed and used to improve the use of virtual teaming both in industry and academia.

The setting for our study was in a prominent business school within a large public research university located in the United States that began embracing the concept of online learning a decade ago, earlier than most other academic institutions. This fact serves to highlight the innovative and forward thinking climate that exists and mirrors that of many business organizations that promote change and development through their competitive strategy. The institution's initial focus was to grow its MBA program by expanding the offerings globally through the utilization of an asynchronous learning system. While this focus has grown to include undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate offerings over time, the online MBA has proved to be a substantial source of revenue for the business school, a fact that has helped advance online education throughout the overall institution. The goal remains to grow the online course and degree offerings dramatically over time.

Given the apparent strategy of many other academic institutions, both private for-profit and public not-for-profit that appear to also be promoting significant expansion of online courses, understanding virtual teaming is not sufficient. Instead, we must seek methods to make the use of virtual teams more efficient and effective in the online learning environment so that the knowledge learned can then be transferred to businesses worldwide, resulting in a higher level of success in the use of virtual teams in those venues as well (Balotsky & Christensen, 2004). In fact,

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