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WORK TOGETHER... WHEN APART CHALLENGES AND WHAT IS NEED FOR EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL TEAMS

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ABSTRACT : Increasingly competitive global markets and accelerating technological changes have increased the need for people to contact via electronic medium to have daily updates, the people those who could not able to meet face to face every day. Those who contact via electronic medium i.e. Virtual Team, are having number of benefit but to achieve these potential benefits, however, leaders need to overcome liabilities inherent in the lack of direct contact among team members and managers. Team members may not naturally know how to interact effectively across space and time. By this paper author try to throw some lights on the challenges that virtual team faces and try to elaborate what is needed for Virtual Team.

Key Words: Team, Virtual Team

1. TEAM

The team approach to managing organization is having a diverse and substantial impact on organizations and individuals [1]. Teams promise to be a cornerstone of progressive management for the foreseeable future. According to the management expert Peter Drucker [2], tomorrow's organizations will be flatter, information based, and organized around teams.

A Team is small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, common performance goals, and an approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable [3].

2. VIRTUAL TEAM

2.1 Introduction

These are the teams that may never actually meet together in the same room-their activities take place on the computer via teleconferencing and other electronic information system. Teamwork has been around since before our ancestors gathered up their spears and learned how to work together to gang up on mastodons and saber-toothed tigers. Many experts agree that teams are the primary unit of performance in any organization. Today there is a new kind of team – a “virtual” team made up of people who communicate electronically. Its members may hardly ever see each other in person. In fact, they may never meet at all, expect in cyberspace.

There are several different definitions of virtual teams, but what these definitions have in common is

that, virtual team members are physically separated (by time and / or space) and that virtual team members primarily interact electronically [4-5]. This researcher defines virtual teams as teams of people who primarily interact electronically and who may meet face-to-face occasionally. In simple terms, then; *virtual teams = teams + electronic links + groupware*.

2.2 Types of Virtual Team

Generally, we can differentiate various forms of “virtual” work depending on the number of persons involved and the degree of interaction between them. The first is “telework” (telecommuting) which is done partially or completely outside of the main company workplace with the aid of information and telecommunication services [6]. “Virtual groups” exist when several teleworkers are combined and each member reports to the same manager [6-7]. In contrast, a “virtual team” exist when the members of a virtual group interact with each other in order to accomplish common goals. Finally, “virtual communities” are larger entities of distributed work in which members participate via the internet, guided by common purposes, roles and norms.

Cascio and Shurygailo [8] have clarified the difference form of virtual team by classifying it with respect to two primary variables namely; the number of location (one or more) and the number of managers (one or more). Table 1 illustrates this graphically.

Therefore there are four categories of teams:

1. Teleworkers : A single manager of a team at one location
2. Remote team: A single manager of a team distributed across multiple location
3. Matrixed teleworkers: Multiple manager of a team at one location
4. Matrixed remote teams: Multiple managers across multiple locations

		Managers	
		One	Multiple
Locations	One	Teleworkers	Matrixed Teleworkers
	Multiple	Remote Team	Matrixed Remote Teams

Table 1: Forms of Virtual Teams [8]

2.3 Challenges for Virtual Team members

The classic co-located team is always the best option. This set-up is not always feasible and distributed virtual team is used instead. There are a number of challenges for virtual teams.

Virtual team face particular challenge involving trust [9] which is a key element to overcome selfish interest and build successful interaction, effective communication [10] that is even more critical for success in the virtual setting [10], deadlines [11], and team cohesiveness [12]. While there are great advantages that come with the adoption of the virtual teams, new challenges rise with them [13]. Cascio [14] declared that there are five main disadvantages to a virtual team: lack of physical interaction, loss of face-to-face synergies, lack of trust, greater concern with predictability and reliability, and lack of social interaction [4]. Virtual teams are challenged because they are virtual: they exist through computer mediated communication technology rather than face-to-face interaction [15]. Sometimes they report to different supervisors and they function as empowered professionals who are expected to use their initiative and resources to contribute to accomplishment of the team goal [7, 16].

2.4 What is needed for Effective Virtual Team

Number of studies and literature shows the factors that impact on the effectiveness of virtual teams are still ambiguous [7, 17]. Many of the acknowledged challenges of effective virtual team working focus on ensuring good communication among all members of the distributed team [18]. For example, Jarvenpaa and Leidner [11] found that regular and timely communication feedback was key to building trust and commitment in distributed teams. Lin *et al.* [17] study indicates that social dimensional factors need to be considered early on in the virtual team creation process and are critical to the effectiveness of the team. Communication is a tool that directly influences the social dimensions of the team and in addition the performance of the team has a positive impact on satisfaction with the virtual team.

For teams moving from co-location to virtual environments, an ability to adapt and change can be a long process riddled with trial and error scenarios. This process is seen as necessary to encourage effective virtual teams [19]. Despite weak ties between virtual team members, ensuring lateral communication maybe adequate for effective virtual team performance. In terms of implementation, lateral communication in both virtual context and composition teams can be increased by reducing the hierarchical structure of the team (i.e. a flatter reporting structure and/or decentralization) and the use of enabling computer-mediated communication tools [20].

Shachaf and Hara [21] suggest four dimensions of effective virtual team leadership.

1. Communication (the leader provides continuous feedback, engages in regular and prompt communication, and clarifies tasks);
2. Understanding (the leader is sensitive to schedules of members , appreciates their opinions and suggestions, cares about member’s problems, gets to know them, and expresses a personal interest in them);
3. Role clarity (the leader clearly defines responsibilities of all members, exercises authority, and mentors virtual team members); and
4. Leadership attitude (the leader is assertive yet not too “bossy,” caring, relates to members at their own levels, and maintains a consistent attitude over the life of the project).

Bal and Teo [22] similar to their study in [23] by observation and interview identified 12 elements for effective virtual team working. It is illustrated in below Figure 1.

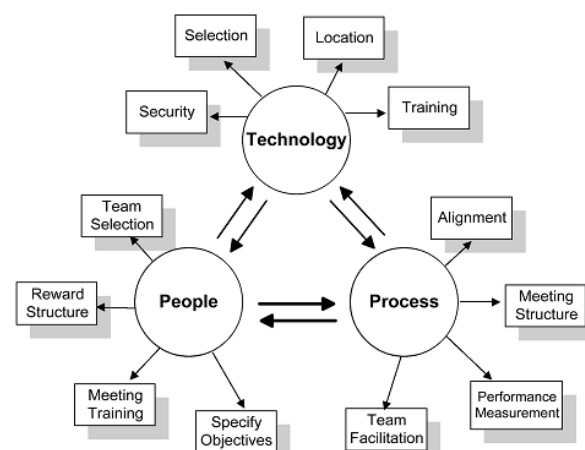


Fig 1: Model for Effective virtual team working (Source [23])

3. CONCLUSION

Strong business and social pressures are driving the adoption of virtual team working. This paper with a comprehensive review of literature and related resources covering the topic along with Bal and Teo [22], find that success in implementing virtual team

working is more about processes and people than about technology. Virtual teams offer many benefits to organizations striving to handle a more demanding work environment, but also present many challenges and potential pitfalls.

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