Deborah L. Duarte, and Nancy Tennant Snyder

*Mastering Virtual Teams: Strategies, Tools and Techniques that Succeed, 3rd Edition*
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Innovations in communication and decision support technology are providing organizations the ability to enhance performance by creating virtual teams. When valuable members are geographically and organizationally dispersed, the creation of virtual teams provides the flexibility to draw on knowledge, skills, and perspectives that would not be available for on-site collaboration. Virtual teams pool the talents of an organization’s own employees and employees of trading partners and consulting firms to meet the demands of a global competitive environment.

Research and practice have shown that structuring organizations through virtual teams leads to different issues than structuring through traditional hierarchies or even through co-located teams. When team leaders and members operate remotely from each other, familiar social and cultural norms are not available for influencing team members’ attitudes and encouraging cooperative behavior. When they are co-located, leaders and members develop relationships that are both informal and task-related. They are able to observe first-hand the time and effort expended by members. Conflicts can be identified and resolved. However, when team members are dispersed, it is more difficult to build relationships. Many traditional forms of monitoring and control are not feasible. Performance evaluation of individuals becomes more difficult. Misunderstandings arise due to cultural, organizational, functional, and technological diversity. Communi-
cation is more complicated—the very technology that enables the existence of virtual teams makes it cognitively more difficult to interact virtually than face to face (Kock, 2004).

As Pinsonneault and Caya (2005) pointed out in this journal, a substantial body of theoretical and empirical literature is accumulating that addresses these issues. Researchers from MIS (e.g., Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004), organizational behavior (e.g., Wilson, Straus, & McEvily, 2006), communication (e.g., Walther & Bunz, 2005) and other disciplines have identified a growing list of factors that influence the success of virtual teams. These factors include: task-technology fit, cultural differences, computer-mediated communication, team role preferences, team life cycles, incentives, conflict management, and trust.

Fortunately for team leaders and members, Deborah L. Duarte and Nancy Tennant Snyder have set out to distill the academic literature into a “user friendly” format in their book, *Mastering Virtual Teams: Strategies, Tools and Techniques that Succeed*. The first edition (1999) succeeded and was a state-of-the-art reflection of the current research at that time. Unfortunately, the third edition, which is the subject of this review, reflects very little of the research published between 1999 and 2006. It is the hope of this reviewer that the authors undertake a serious literature review before revising this book again or developing a new book on virtual teams. The skill with which the authors translated the early research, if applied to recent research, would lead to an even more valuable asset for teams. The third edition does include useful lessons that the authors have learned from their consulting practices since the first edition.

This book is divided into three parts: Part 1—Understanding Virtual Teams, Part 2—Creating Virtual Teams, and Part 3—Mastering Virtual Teams. Part 1 has three chapters. Chapter 1 describes several different types of virtual teams (e.g., product development, functional, management, actions) and the characteristics of each. More importantly, it includes a discussion of complexity and has a checklist that highlights ways in which virtual teams may be more complex than traditional teams (e.g., time zone, native language, national culture, and access to communication and collaboration technology differences). Although the book focuses on tools and techniques for team leaders and members, the first chapter also includes a list of critical success factors and a checklist that are intended to assess the organizational readiness to utilize virtual teams. This is one place where the authors could have used the recent literature. For example, Ferrin and Dirks (2003) examined the impact of incentives on trust in teams and found that reward structures had a strong influence on trust, which is an important factor in teams. Chapter 2 reviews the task-technology fit literature and classifies technologies by the usefulness for four types of tasks: generating ideas, solving
problems with answers, solving problems without answers, and negotiations. Chapter 3 delves into national, organizational, and functional cultures and how attitudes can differ. The national culture discussion is based on four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, long term-short term, and context. The organizational culture discussion is based on the competing values model and the tension resulting from clan versus market cultures and hierarchy versus adhocracy cultures. Unlike the other chapters, which are primarily prescriptive, this chapter is primarily descriptive.

Part 2, Creating Virtual Teams, has four chapters. Chapter 4 identifies common misconceptions about virtual teams and dispels them. Chapter 5 identifies the steps and detailed lists that the team leader should use in starting a virtual team. Of special interest here is the establishment of team norms for participation, communication, conflict management, meeting management, problem solving, and decision making. The examples given are useful, but this is another place where the current literature would have been useful. The impact of communication norms on success and trust could serve as motivation for members to comply with norms. For example, Jarvenpaa and her colleagues (1998, 1999, 2004) found that timely and substantive responses to the contributions of other team members are characteristics of successful teams and lead to trust. They also found that continuing to include non-contributing members enhanced trust. Walther and Bunz (2005) examined communication rules for virtual teams and identified rules such as start immediately, communicate frequently, acknowledge others, be explicit about what you are thinking and doing, and observe deadlines. They found that merely setting a single rule requiring frequent communication led to a reduction in uncertainty and an increase in trust over no rules. These findings are more substantive than some of the advice given in the chapter (e.g., Do not use ALL CAPITALS in the message body of an e-mail.) Chapter 6 discusses team member roles and competencies. The authors examine team roles and competencies rather than functional, which is commendable. A useful addition to this chapter in future editions would be a discussion of the interpersonal circumplex model (ICM) as a theoretical framework for understanding the role of personal traits in collaboration in virtual contexts. ICM posits that tendencies in interpersonal interaction stem from personal dispositions that can be understood in terms of dimensions of power and affiliation—fundamental constituents of user’s personality. Brown, Marshall, and Rodgers (2004) develop a model that proposes that interpersonal traits, specifically, personality type as defined by the circumplex, affect the individual’s disposition to trust, perceived trustworthiness, communication, and thereby affects willingness to collaborate, and the sustainability and productivity of
the collaboration. Chapter 7 is a critical chapter because it deals with building trust. Trust has repeatedly been shown to have a positive impact on team members’ interactions and success and is widely considered to be a critical success factor for teams. The impact of national culture and technology on trust are also included.

Part 3, Mastering Virtual Teams, has three chapters. Chapter 8 deals with team meetings. When identifying “who does what” in a virtual meeting, the four roles they identify include the role of technology. They also discuss the appropriate choice of medium for the task. Chapter 9 deals with team dynamics and incorporates concepts from previous chapters. This chapter discusses the stage of a team’s life cycle, which includes conflict management. Chapter 10, the final chapter, provides advice about working in an adaptive environment.

This book is not, and is not intended to be, a theoretical treatise debating the pros and cons structuring organizations through networks of teams. It is, and succeeds as, a useful, practical guide for team leaders and members. The authors facilitate the use of their book by teams through abundant exercises, checklists, agendas, diagnostic questionnaires, and competency assessments, which are not only presented within the chapters, but are also available on a cd-rom for download and reproduction.

While academic scholars may find the ubiquitous checklists, questionnaires, and assessments to be distracting, the authors do identify many of the issues currently being examined in the literature. Their references and recommended reading list might prove a useful starting point for a novice researcher on virtual teams, but with the caveat noted above that most citations pre-date the first edition (1999). The prescriptive approach the authors take to extracting the key concepts and communicating the findings from the literature is a useful technique for communicating current research to undergraduate and masters’ students. Their approach also demonstrates how to glean relevant lessons from the literature for use in a consulting practice.

REFERENCES


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