A mere 16 years ago, one of the authors of this book moved from Atlanta, Georgia, to Silicon Valley, California, in order to take advantage of a job opportunity with a different organization in the same company. The company paid his moving expenses, bought his house in Atlanta, and paid points and closing costs on a new house in Fremont, California. The move cost the company over $50,000 and uprooted the author from friends and family.

Today, it would be hard to imagine the same thing happening in the author’s same company. The company wouldn’t want to spend the $50,000 relocation costs, although such things still do happen in certain circumstances, and the author wouldn’t even think of moving 3,000 miles just to switch jobs within the same company. The thing that has changed in those 14 years is the rise of virtual teams.

As we pondered the idea of writing this book, we had several (remote) meetings where we discussed: What do we mean by a virtual team? Do we mean geographically dispersed teams, where team members live or work in different locations/states/countries? Do we mean teams with telecommuters (a form of geographic dispersion in itself)? Do we mean teams formed horizontally across vertical organizations (project teams, task forces, etc.)? Do we mean teams formed across different companies? We decided that we meant all of those things, and this book will cover all those manifestations of virtual teams, with a special focus on geographic dispersion.

In the 1990s, businesses began experimenting with various virtual team models to solve specific business problems. These problems included getting the right person for the job regardless of location, getting sales reps out of the
office and in front of customers, forming teams that cross national boundaries, and downsizing office space. As we move into the 21st century, additional business problems with virtual teams are being addressed, including the need to cross company boundaries, the increased avoidance of travel (for economic and security reasons, among others), and an increased interest in taking advantage of the inputs from people with diverse perspectives and experiences. Have virtual teams helped to solve those business problems? Are there ways to make virtual teams more effective to better solve those (and yet undefined) business problems? We’ll examine those (and other) questions in this book from the perspective of everyone involved in them—participants, program managers, and managers.

Oftentimes, virtual teams are formed to foster cross-organizational interaction in companies that are traditionally organized in vertical “silos.” The first virtual team that two of the authors of this book worked on was in the mid-1990s, when they tried to form a sense of community among various decentralized (and globally dispersed) IT organizations that one might call the “congress” approach. In more recent times, our company has gone through a “reinvention,” which has both centralized a formally decentralized company and also put much more focus on cross-organizational cooperation and synergy. While suddenly cross-organization teams have become the philosophical norm within our company, there still have been many cultural barriers to overcome along the way.

Within our own organization, we’ve recently spearheaded a project that allowed engineers in different vertical “silos” to “bid” on projects on which they wished to work within the overall organization. We’ll report the results of that particular project in this book.

Regarding geographically dispersed teams, many companies followed a similar progression in the creation of virtual teams. Many started with teams comprised of multiple co-located employees with only one or two individuals working in alternate locations (remote sites, telecommuting, etc.). This was often done either to reward a favored employee by letting him or her work at home (probably the wrong reason to have telecommuting) or when a need arose for a specific skill set that could not be filled locally. With this model, the one or two remote employees often were made to feel like the “odd man or woman out,” and team activity centered around the central “hive” where the bulk of the team members worked. The remote team members would “fly in” to the central hive from time to time for face-to-face meetings.

In time, companies started to experiment with models where multiple team members were spread across different sites or even different countries. There
was usually a central hive to which team members were expected to travel from time to time, but sometimes the meeting location for the face-to-face meetings would rotate between the sites where the larger concentrations of team members resided. With everyone “remote,” team dynamics changed dramatically, and meeting methodologies became less hive-centered (with the attendant “odd-man-or-woman-out” syndrome mentioned previously) and more focused on the efficient use of electronic collaboration tools. (It should be mentioned that as recently as a year ago, our own organization was still having meetings where the hive core would meet in a conference room with especially poor speakerphones used for the “remote dial-in users,” who actually were in the majority numerically.)

As teams became more comfortable working remotely, their use of tools such as audio conferences, teamspaces, e-mail, and data conferencing became a norm rather than an exception. However, it was still common for companies to fly people to occasional face-to-face internal meetings (e.g., kick-offs, check points, end games), because, of course, “face-to-face is best.” (We even have seen recent industry analysts’ articles saying that it’s impossible to have effective geographically dispersed teams without occasional face-to-face meetings). Then the “dot-bomb” collapse occurred, corporate earnings plunged, and suddenly the expense of traveling for internal meetings seemed extravagant when companies were laying off thousands of employees. Companies turned more and more to electronic meeting solutions. This trend was fueled by security and safety concerns after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States, as well as the SARS epidemic in 2003.

We believe that as we move into the future, various driving forces such as the economy, world political tension, work/life balance, personal preferences, and a generational change will lead companies to use virtual teams as a norm, and discover that the virtual experience may be preferable to meeting face-to-face. Instead of face-to-face meetings as a norm, they will be viewed as a “nice-to-have” feature in good economic times, but not a requirement. (Don’t get us wrong—we don’t mind meeting face-to-face from a philosophical viewpoint; we just don’t view it as a requirement for getting the job done.)

While most of the experiences that we’ll recap in this book regarding virtual teams is focused on large enterprises, we believe that many of the precepts and best practices described can be applied to smaller companies or even to community organizations and church groups. One company that has less than 25 employees is organized almost completely virtually, both organizationally and in terms of geographic dispersion.
The company, which is in the unglamorous but profitable business of testing commercial air conditioning units, would never describe itself as especially progressive or in the forefront of an organizational revolution, yet only three of the employees are centrally located, with the rest spread throughout the states where the company does business (i.e., technicians in different geographic regions). Most communication with the small central office is by cell phone, the Web, e-mail, and internal face-to-face meetings that occur once a year or less. Interestingly, the company has been toying with the idea of eliminating the physical central office entirely (it serves no customer function) and having the central office functions provided remotely by telecommuting. Now that is a virtual organization!

We believe that the virtual team model will expand in the future, as the need for speed and rapid information exchange overcomes traditionally vertical corporate models. And we believe that geographic dispersion will continue to be a common model in the future, and that people will be much more comfortable working remotely, as the younger generation raised with e-mail, chat rooms, and the Internet integrate into the work force (and as technology continues to improve).

In this book, we hope to share our combined 25+ years of experience working on virtual teams as well as present information and insights from other companies involved in virtual teams with whom we’ve worked. We’ll discuss how we’ve worked to make virtual meetings better than face-to-face and how virtual teams can help solve real 21st-century business problems. We’ll also discuss how geographically-dispersed teams can work well together—perhaps even better than co-located teams. Note that this book is not a beginner’s guide, and it assumes some working knowledge of the virtual team concept.

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Note: This book was entirely written by three authors in three separate locations with no face-to-face meetings.