Reader's Guide to *Working Virtually: Challenges of Virtual Teams*

Before we go into too much detail about virtual teams, we should think about why we even have them in the first place and what can be accomplished through virtual teams.

An Introduction to Teamwork and Communications

From an overall perspective, virtual teams are just another model for getting work done. Virtual teams and teams in general are characterized by the fact that each member of the team is dependent upon one or more other members in order to accomplish the overall goal. In contrast, a group is just a collection of people who happen to be working together, but they are not dependent upon each other.

For example, one can hire a group of photographers to take pictures at a wedding. They happen to be at the same place doing the same thing, but they work totally independent of each other. The quality and quantity of a particular photographer's work is completely unrelated to the experience and skill set that the other photographers bring to the wedding.

On the other hand, when a caterer comes to serve lunch at a wedding, the caterer brings a team. The team will cook, set up, and serve. Each member of the team is dependent upon the other to be successful. If the cook doesn't

show up, there's nothing to serve. If the set-up team doesn't show up, the cook can't cook.

Thus, situations where each team member's work is interdependent and required for success, the virtual team model can be used to make the team more efficient, more effective, or both.

The single most critical component that makes teamwork possible is effective communication. Again, if you are working in an independent group of people, you don't need to communicate with each other to be successful. But if you are working in an interdependent team, communication is critical—you need to know what the other person is going to do, when they will do it, and how you will work together.

As early as 900 B.C., the first postal service for government use was developed in China. Later, smoke signals, drumbeats, carrier pigeons, and semaphore flag signaling were used as communication tools. These were the tools that enabled long-distance teamwork and, to some extent, the first virtual teams.

The quality and speed of communications drive the effectiveness and efficiency of the team.

Imagine two teams, each on opposite sides of a wide river, trying to communicate with each other through smoke signals on a windy day in order to decide whether they will meet at the head or at the mouth of the river. It takes quite a bit of time to light a fire, which reduces the efficiency of the team. And the wind blowing the smoke makes the quality of the communication low, increasing the chance that the signal will be misread and reducing the effectiveness of the team.

Efficiency and Effectiveness: Divide and Conquer

Divide and conquer is a technique for breaking down a problem into smaller parts, working on the smaller parts, then combining the smaller results into an overall solution.

Let's say you want to build and sell a table. You could easily do everything yourself, if you're building a simple table. You can go out and buy the wood and the stain. Then you design the table, cut the wood, assemble the table, stain it, put an ad in the paper, wait for phone calls, and work with customers.

That's fine if you have quite a bit of time or you only want to sell a few tables a year. But what happens if you want to sell more? What happens if your customers don't want tables made with wood that is local to your shop, but they want exotic foreign wood from across the world?

In that case, it is more efficient and effective to divide and conquer. Perhaps you act as the overall coordinator and designer, and have a team that does the rest. You can have someone else buy the wood from both local and foreign suppliers. Someone in the shop can cut the wood and assemble the table. Someone else can stain it, and another person can advertise and sell the table. You've added quite a bit of complexity to building the table, but now you can handle more requests, and you don't have to do everything yourself. As mentioned previously, communication between team members is critical to ensure success.

Consider another example. Let's say you have a complex question that you're trying to answer. One way to get an answer is to look around the room and ask everyone you see.

That approach looks something like this:
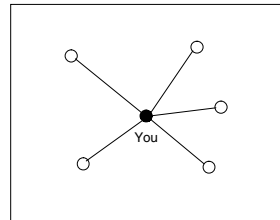
That's somewhat of a divide-and-conquer approach. But what if you were to look beyond the resources that happen to be at your current location? You could leverage all the resources you have and all their resources, even though they are not in the room with you. You have more people looking at the problem, more approaches to solving the problem, and, in the end, a more effective solution that was arrived at more efficiently. And with everyone working together towards a common goal, you now have a virtual team. That approach looks like this:
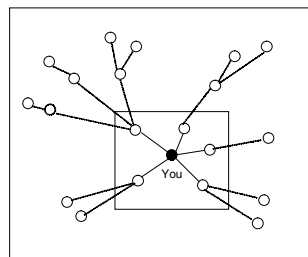
Skill-Sets for
Successful Distributed Teams

In a divide-and-conquer approach, teamwork and communication are essential. Making sure you and your team have the right skills for this type of problem solving will ensure that you take full advantage of this technique.

Imagine you are a film actor or actress in 1927. You've spent your entire career developing dramatic facial expressions and exaggerated body motions, because all the films that you've been in have been silent, and that was the only way to get the emotion across to the audience. Then, later in the year, a movie called "The Jazz Singer" is made. It's the first movie with audible dialog. Soon after, silent movies are replaced by movies with sound, music, and dialog. You find that good acting is no longer just about facial expressions and body motions. You now need to learn how to speak with emotion, enunciate your lines clearly, and perhaps even learn to sing. But you also still need to remember the basics of acting that you learned when movies were silent.

Making the transition from working alone to working in a team, and, more importantly, working in a physically distributed virtual team, requires a similar need to acquire new skill sets and continue emphasizing basic ones. Since you will be working with people who are not in the same place as you are and, in many cases, people you do not know personally, communication and trust are the major basic skills that you will need.

Earlier, we discussed the importance of clear and timely communication. Let's look at the importance of trust when working in a distributed team. Without a sense of trust, you are not sure the results you receive from team members are correct, and the team members are not sure why they should be working on the problem in the first place, much less what they get out of helping you with your problem. Establishing this trust and agreement on a common goal will ensure that the team is successful and the result effective.

Throughout the rest of the book, we'll discuss the best practices for gaining this trust and techniques for managing and working in a virtual team, but now you should understand how virtual teams can be used in a divide-and-conquer approach to solving problems and the importance of communication and trust in ensuring virtual teams are successful.

> Virtual teams can take many forms. They can include geographically dispersed teams, where team members work in different locations (states, countries, etc.), teams with telecommuters who work away from a central site, teams formed across organizations to produce specific deliverables (project teams, task forces, etc.) or teams formed across different companies.

Virtual Teams: Defined

For the purposes of this book, we define a virtual team as any team with members that are geographically distributed across more than one location. Virtual team members cannot frequently meet face-to-face (i.e., all gathering together in the same meeting room) and must rely on technological tools to facilitate team interactions. Here's how we break down the components of the term *virtual team*.

- **Virtual** - Term used to describe any team with graphically distributed team members who are unable to interact face-to-face on a frequent basis (daily, monthly, quarterly, etc.)

- **Team** - Any group of individuals working together to achieve a business result. For the purposes of our discussion, there are several forms of teams, including the following:

   Project teams - Teams of individuals brought together to produce a specific deliverable (e.g., project teams, task forces, etc.). Team membership can be across organizations and can even include individuals from other companies (e.g., consultants, outsource partners, business partners, etc.). Project teams often are disbanded, once the team's specific deliverable is completed; however, we have also encountered virtual project teams that produced ongoing results over several years.

   For example, a project team for the "Widget Company" might include an engineer from the development department, who works in Germany; a specialist from the marketing organization, who works in Australia; and an engineer from the online support team, who works in France. Management might bring this cross-functional group together in a project team to develop improved marketing approaches for a specific product. Once the marketing plan is assembled, presented to management, and passed

on to the appropriate teams for implementation, the project team will disband.

Direct Teams - An individual's direct team is comprised of a manager and his or her direct reports. Members of a direct team also can be geographically distributed. Using the previous example, the development department could have members working in Germany, Australia, and the United States.

An Entire Organization - An entire organization with multiple levels of management and team reporting also can be geographically distributed across multiple locations. In this case, the entire organization would be described as working in a virtual environment.

We will illustrate this with an organizational chart for the Widget Company from our previous discussion.

The Marketing Team, shown in the chart with the solid line box, is an example of a direct team that is geographically distributed, with members in the United States, Germany, and Australia. The virtual project team discussed in the previous example is highlighted with the dashed line. The project team includes Sue (in Australia), Hugo (in Germany), and Beau (in France). The entire Widget Company is a virtual organization, as employees across many teams are located in many different locations. Note that at first glance it may appear that the online support team is a co-located team, with all team members in France. However, even this team could be a virtual team, as members could be working from multiple locations in France.

The Widget Company
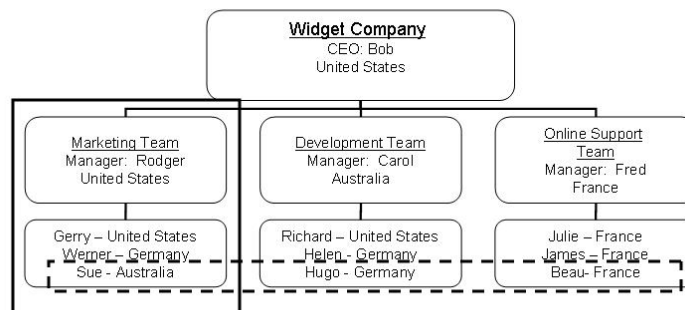
The Format for the Book

A quick scan of the Table of Contents shows that we have divided our content into five major sections. To provide the reader with a framework for our discussion, following are the main elements of each section of the book.

- In **Section I**, we will present what we believe are the eight myths of virtual teams. We will discuss each myth in detail, highlighting why each one has the potential to develop within virtual team environments and how we think their impact can be eliminated (or at least diminished). We'll also present some of the unique challenges that telecommuters face when working on virtual teams and discuss the importance of establishing trust among virtual team members.

- In **Section II**, we will highlight the business benefits of virtual teams and present a case study of a highly successful virtual team (the PC COE team) within Hewlett-Packard.

- In **Section III**, we will discuss the progression of virtual teams within the corporate environment. We will start with what we are defining as a "mostly co-located" model and progress to the "mostly virtual model" for teams. We will also discuss the challenges and needs of virtual teams, the skills necessary for success on virtual teams, and some of the methodologies that virtual teams can use to interact and conduct business. This discussion will include several case studies on creative ways that we've seen virtual teams accomplish typical team goals and activities as well as a chapter on managing a virtual team. We will also introduce what we are labeling a "virtual team maturity curve," designed to help individuals or organizations determine how receptive they are to virtual work as well as presenting an international view of virtual teams.

- In **Section IV**, we will discuss best practices for virtual teams. We will talk about the tools available for use by virtual teams as well as some of the techniques we've seen employed for team building within virtual teams. We'll include a brief discussion of situations where virtual meetings might be preferable to face-to-face interactions. We'll also present some of the arguments against virtual teams.

- In **Section V**, we will look ahead to the future, highlighting how the use of virtual teams within corporations may evolve in the future as well as how future generations may influence the use of virtual teams. We will also

present a narrative that highlights how virtual teams may meet in the 2010 timeframe.

While this book was not written as a beginner's guide to virtual teams and virtual work, if you are new to the area, you may want to scan the Glossary and Tools Appendix to read more about the terms we will be using and the technology tools (i.e., audio-conferencing services, meeting management software, instant messaging, etc.) that we will be discussing throughout the text.