Chapter XIV

Virtual Teams:
What We Know,
What We Don’t Know

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the extant empirical literature on virtual teams and presents what we know and what we don’t know about them. Drawing upon the literature from both Organization Behavior and IS, we propose a framework that integrates the most important variables affecting virtual teams. The framework is then used to assess the effects of virtual teamwork on group processes and outcomes. The paper also discusses the challenges facing researchers studying virtual teams and presents an agenda for future research.
Introduction

Throughout the last decade, virtual teams (VT) have gained a significant interest from both IS academic and managerial communities. Due to recent breakthroughs in telecommunication and information technologies, organizations are no longer constrained by geographical distance or time zone differences, enabling managers to access previously unavailable expertise, enhance cross-functional interactions necessary to deal with today’s highly dynamic business environment, and form the best possible groups (Griffith, Sawyer & Neale, 2003; Powell, Piccoli & Ives, 2004; Sole & Edmondson, 2002; Townsend, deMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). While many researchers claim that we still know little about the idiosyncratic nature of virtual teamwork (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001), the recent research efforts on this topic have generated a significant body of knowledge that needs to be synthesized and assessed.

The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it aims at synthesizing the extant empirical evidence on virtual teams. Second, it develops an agenda for future research on virtual teams. The paper is organized into three sections and a conclusion. The first section presents a conceptual framework that integrates the OB and IS literature and serves as the basis for assessing the empirical literature. The second section describes the method used to conduct our review and the third section presents the results of our assessment. The paper concludes by discussing the findings and suggesting an agenda for future research.

Framework of Virtual Team Research

Virtual Teams: A Definition

In this paper, we adopt Hinds and Bailey’s (2003) conceptualization of virtual teams: in virtual teams (1) members are separated by distance and (2) are forced to rely on technologies to mediate their communication and to coordinate their work. Virtual teams can be culturally distributed (Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner., 1998; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001-2002), spread across multiple time zones (Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & Hung, 2003; Piccoli & Ives, 2003), functionally distributed (Malhotra, Majchrzak, Carman, & Lott; Zolin, Hinds, Fruchter, & Levitt, 2004), organizationally distributed (Majchrzak, Rice, Malhotra, & King, 2000), or present combinations of these distribution modes (Maznevski & Chuduba, 2000). These team arrangements are also referred to as geographically dispersed teams, geographically distributed teams, and dispersed teams.
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