Chapter 6

E–Tools for E–Team: The Importance of Social Ties and Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Organizations are heavily investing in virtual teams to enhance their performance and competitiveness. These types of teams are made possible by advances in computer-mediated communication and software that allows people to work collaboratively on projects without being co-located or even working at the same time. Managing teams and collaborating online presents unique challenges. Maintaining a productive virtual team requires more than just the willingness of global participants, but even more so the tools to conduct and manage virtual projects. It is therefore important to incorporate online collaboration skills into the IT curriculum at the university level. This chapter provides a general overview of virtual teams; today’s collaborative tools, and discuss expertise necessary for virtual teams to be successful.

INTRODUCTION

The globalization has changed the traditional workplace to a more modern workplace where the technology has created new opportunities that did not exist before (Cascio, 2015). The world has become more competitive because of the endless opportunities of information and resources due to the globalization. According to Townsend et al. (1998), an organization has no choice but to operate in a world shaped by globalization and the information revolution. There are only two options: adapt or die (Townsend et al. 1998). A solution to how an organization can embrace the technological revolution is through virtual teams. Virtual team members primary interact through electronic communication systems, and are often consisting of members that are dispersed both organizationally and geographically (Cascio, 2000). Teams used to be located in one place with face-to-face meetings and collaboration as the most efficient or sometimes only option. Now teams have become virtual, consisting of telecommuters and co-workers located around the globe collaborating on various jobs. In academia educators are struggling to get todays students feel comfortable collaborating on IT project solely online, it can even be hard
in the classroom sometimes. However, if combined with face-to-face meetings then the teams become more effective. There are many e-tools, which are helping to close this gap such as Bit bucket, Bitrix, Google Docs, Instant Messaging, Drop Box etc. Google Docs allows for multiple people modifying a document at the same time whereas Drop Box does not. Jing is an interesting program that allows you to take a screen capture or make a video and add a voice over. This is most beneficial when creating instructional videos or tutorials. Skype has been around for years and offers the most popular form of video conference calls. The biggest perk is that the service is free for mobile devices. On the other hand basecamp is an online collaboration tool that is used to manage projects to include task lists and team communication (Rawson, 2010).

The current work environment is quite complex with many changes and uncertainties. This has led to changes to the ways in which teamwork occurs. Virtual teams rely on information being communicated to all its members swiftly and team members have to feel comfortable and knowledgeable using various tools to increase accuracy and efficiency with the product being developed.

Factors that improve the quality of teamwork include the effectiveness of each individual, the information sharing process, project commitment, and joint responsibility for the milestones (Senge, 2006). Whether face-to-face or virtual, teams require parallel and distributive leadership (Andrews et al., 2004). Virtual teams are based on a leadership culture of learning, trust, and openness, which is communicated to all members that there are choices and that any individual can demonstrate leadership and thus influence direction and development (Walker & Shuangye, 2007). Virtual teams must have members who are capable of reflection, active and critical thinking, and who are capable of moving in unison even if individuals are separated geographically. Lister and Harnish (2011) reported there are about 2.9 million U.S. virtual workers since 2005. Between 2005 and 2009, it grew by 61%. Based on the current trends, it will grow to 4.9 million by 2016.

Remote teams in the workplace are becoming more commonplace. According to estimates from the American Community Survey, “telecommuting has risen 79 percent between 2005 and 2012, and now makes up 2.6 percent of the American workforce, or 3.2 million workers” (Tugend, 2014). With current advancing trends in mobile technologies, “managers must adjust their approach to achieving their business goals” and align mission accomplishment to support remote teams with the fundamentals of technology and consistent communication (McGannon, 2014). According to Reynolds (2014) forty-four percent of the respondents wanted to telecommute at least part of the time according to a survey of 1,500 people conducted by the website flexjobs. This drastic increase in virtual team members does not account for the part-time remote participants which is actually an even larger number than the full time employee. A strong indicator as to the upward spike in virtual/remote employees is the availability for utilization across a grand scope of business objectives. Supply, engineering, product development, information technologies, finance and customer service functions and initiatives only scratch the surface of the overall applicability of virtual environments (Kock, 2011), and in a global economy and internet based market this trend does not seem to be slowing down. In addition, more free-wifi is being provided in more business locations and by transportation agencies (airlines, bus, train, boat, etc.). According to a Boston Business Journal article dated February 3, 2015 a spokesman for Microsoft encouraged employees to “…[To] take advantage of the numerous productivity tools at the disposal including Microsoft Lync and Skype for online meetings, and other cloud and mobile work solutions that allow our employees to be productive in the office, at home, or in the local coffee shop” (Boston Business Journal, 2015). Businesses are making it very convenient for the user to stay connected while being away from the office.
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