Virtual Teams Classification

Kangning Wei  
Syracuse University, USA

Chingning Wang  
Syracuse University, USA

INTRODUCTION

It is a considerable challenge for most of today’s organizations to cope with the rapidly changing business environment, such as global competition and technology revolution (Townsend et al., 1998; Walker, 2000). In response to these changes, organizations must be more dynamic in their organizational operations and adopt innovative approaches to survive and compete effectively (Arnison & Miller, 2002). One of the successful ways is to establish “virtual teams” as organizing units of work.

Virtual teams are groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed workers assembled together mainly by information and communication technologies (ICT) to accomplish one or more organizational tasks (DeSanctis & Poole, 1997; Townsend et al., 1998). Recent research has studied a wide range of potential benefits virtual teams offer to organizations, but implementations of virtual teams in organizations will be at risk if organizations fail to address many challenges faced in virtual context (Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). One of the fundamental questions is to understand the nature of virtual teams. Specially, what kind of virtual teams is the best fit with this organization and task? As Bell and Kozlowski (2002) point out, “the literature has tended to treat virtual teams as a single ‘ideal’ type, yet there are several dimensions or characteristics that vary among and distinguish different types of virtual teams” (p.16). This article underlies four conceptual dimensions that distinguish different types of virtual teams from the literature review. The combination of these dimensions yields many possible types of virtual teams. We hope this classification could provide basic information for further research in virtual teams.

DIMENSIONS OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

The focus of this article is to locate key characteristics that vary across virtual teams, not to classify the types per se and give a rigid definition. There are four dimensions that can differentiate virtual teams from one another (Figure 1): spatial distance, mode of communication, team lifecycle and team membership. From the definition of virtual teams, we can see that the first two are crucial in distinguishing virtual teams from traditional ones (that is, team members use face-to-face communication). Task characteristics can be seen as a moderator in virtual team design (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). In the following section, a description of each dimension is detailed.

Figure 1. Dimensions that distinguish different virtual teams (adapted from Bell & Kozlowski, 2002)