Chapter XIII

Organizing Across Distances: Managing Successful Virtual Team Meetings

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Abstract

This chapter examines the use of computer chat technologies for virtual team meetings. The use of geographically dispersed (i.e., virtual) teams is a growing phenomenon in modern organizations. Although a variety of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been used to conduct virtual team meetings, one technology, synchronous computer chat, has not been exploited to its fullest potential. This chapter discusses some of research findings related to effective virtual teams and examines some structural features of chat as they relate to virtual meetings. Based on these characteristics, I offer tips for using chat as an effective tool for distant collaboration.
Introduction

Since the Industrial Revolution, technology has played a major role in shaping our work practices. Technologies have brought automation, they have brought standardization, and most of all, technology has brought change. In the 21st century, this change is seen most clearly when we look at the impact that computers have had in organizations. While computers are often employed to help workers, that help is not always wanted or needed (see Sellen & Harper, 2002; Zuboff, 1988). However, wanted or not, computers are inescapable in most modern organizations, and their use has become an important part of how many people communicate at work.

Along with the growth of computer use in organizations, there has been a changing of organizational structures; many organizations now have offices and employees spread across the globe (e.g., Dutton, 1999; Iacono & Kling, 2001; Monge & Fulk, 1999), and they often require those employees to communicate and collaborate with each other. The availability and rapid development of computer technology and the Internet is both part of this challenge and part of the solution. Thus we find that organizations have increasingly turned to the use of virtual teams to meet the challenges of the new global marketplace.

Virtual teams are characterized by having some or all of the team’s members located in different geographical locations. This might mean that some of the team members work from home instead of the office, or that members are located in offices in different cities, states, or even countries. Similarly to colocated teams, virtual teams are generally characterized by being project focused, of fixed (and often short) duration, and having revolving membership. Employees may work on more than one team at a time, or may change teams a number of times over the course of 1 year. The challenge to virtual teams is to accomplish the given task with little or no face-to-face contact. And it is this particular characteristic that makes virtual teams an object of research for organization scholars seeking to describe or predict how teams can collaborate effectively at a distance.

Researchers in organizational communication, management, and a variety of other fields have used both experimental and field research to explore the social and technological aspects of virtual team interaction. While there are many points of intersection among these diverse studies of virtual teams, one constant thread observable in the literature is the focus on the end result of teamwork. Although this scholarship has done much to explain the factors that complicate distributed teamwork, these studies—taken apart or together—still do not provide a complete description of exactly how the business of collaboration is achieved within the virtual team.
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