Chapter XII

Virtual Teams in the Traditional Classroom:
Lessons on New Communication Technologies and Training

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Abstract

This chapter examines the technologies available to virtual teams and issues associated with training virtual teams. We first evaluate the benefits and limitations of technologies to aid communication and collaboration. We consider the merits and limitations of asynchronous and synchronous discussion tools, groupware and collaboration tools, and electronic meeting systems. We then offer three different levels of training possible for virtual teams and discuss some key issues associated with training. Each level of training varies in intensity and is dependent upon the nature of the assignment and team objectives. The chapter
concludes with some predictions and recommendations about the future of new technologies and virtual teams in the educational setting. Throughout the chapter, special considerations are made for those virtual teams operating in the traditional classroom.

Introduction

During the past 20 years, team-based movements have enjoyed considerable popularity in educational settings and organizations throughout the country. LaFasto and Larson (2001) suggest that most of us are “…well past the point of needing convincing that collaborative teamwork is an effective tool for managing complex tasks in a rapidly changing environment” (p. xvii). In the past few years, however, the nature of teams and teamwork has begun to change. Pauleen (2004) explains that “growing concern with globalization, the rise of the knowledge worker, the need for innovation, and the increasing use of information and communication technology” have resulted in a new form of “virtual” teams (p. viii). As organizations move increasingly toward such teams, it becomes essential to provide students with experiences working in a virtual environment.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of new communication technologies in virtual teams in the educational setting. In particular, we examine the breadth of technologies available to students in virtual teams, consider the importance of technology-based and general training for team members, and speculate about the future of virtual teams and technologies to support them in an educational setting. Throughout the chapter we draw heavily on our own experience as instructors actively using different types of virtual teams in three college courses we teach — paying special attention to practical implications/lessons for the use of virtual teams in the traditional classroom. To begin, we first briefly address the importance of virtual teams in educational settings and provide some background about our use of virtual teams.