Chapter VIII

Managing the Virtual Team: Critical Skills and Knowledge for Successful Performance

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ABSTRACT

Expectations for manager and employee workplace relationships are changing because of telecommunications technology. Telecommuting allows organizations to effectively combine and use the skills and knowledge of off- and on-site employees. The focus of this chapter is to describe the unique environment and problems presented by virtual teams and to outline the skills and knowledge employees and managers must have so they can achieve team and organizational goals.

Two or more people working together to achieve the same objective, but geographically separated and electronically connected, is a simple definition of a virtual team. (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). Virtual teams can share understandings, facilitate the exchange of ideas, enhance communication and encourage continuous learning. Virtual teams allow organizations to build effective teams from personnel who might not otherwise be available to work...
together, enhance the availability of resources from outside the organization, hire and retain the best people regardless of location, and gain access to needed expertise (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1996).

There are several trends that will escalate the growth of virtual teams in 21st-century organizations: the prevalence of flat organizational structures, environments that require cooperation and competition among organizations, changes in workers’ expectations of organizational participation, the shift toward service/knowledge environments, and increasing globalization of trade activities (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998, p.18). These trends create new challenges for virtual teams compared to the challenges facing traditional teams. Knowledge of the organization, technological capabilities, and mastery of effective management techniques in this emerging environment are core skills for virtual team success. Telecommuting teams must adjust to this new environment by learning more about 1) how the organization functions, 2) how to use new technology productively, and 3) how to manage and promote effective management habits.

**KNOWLEDGE OF THE ORGANIZATION AND ITS GOALS**

Restructuring, or changing an organization’s structure in an attempt to improve and enhance performance, is an ongoing management activity. Changing external and internal environments and technological innovations offer a motivation for continuous organizational rearrangements. The functional and divisional structures that dominated management history have morphed into more hybrid structures that emphasize teams, networks, fewer levels of management, improved communications technologies, wider spans of control, and effective delegation and empowerment techniques. Both managers and employees must recognize how these factors impact virtual team performance.

Successful virtual teams will take their direction from the way a business is organized and how it achieves its goals. Organizational mission, goals, and communication channels are the elements which provide critical links between teams and their organization. The structure of an organization describes jobs and relationships, who is supposed to do what, who is responsible for what, and how different people and organizational units are related to one another. Thus, understanding how organizations are structured is important for any team. Function, product, customer, geographic and matrix structures
Success Factors for the Management of Global Virtual Teams for Software Development
www.igi-global.com/article/success-factors-management-global-virtual/53830?camid=4v1a