Chapter II

Effective Virtual Teamwork: A Socio-Cognitive and Motivational Model

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ABSTRACT

While much of the work on virtual teams is grounded in the assumptions that teams are concrete entities, this chapter conceptualizes teams as psychological entities, existing in the minds of teams’ members and stakeholders. Drawing from interviews with 40 experts in virtual team building and two focus groups, we offer four principles for the existence of a virtual team: the awareness of its members that they are a “team,” identification with the team, commitment to the team goals, and accountability for team success. We then build upon that base to discuss how teams can be made more “intelligent.”

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of business and the trend toward leaner, flatter organizations, combined with ubiquitous access to informational technology, has accelerated the need for firms to coordinate activities that span geographical, as well as organizational, boundaries. In addition, the shift from production- to service-related businesses spawned a new generation of knowledge worker not bound...
to physical work locations. These factors suggest that firms are faced with increased challenges to coordinate tasks across time zones, physical boundaries, and organizational contexts. Consequently, in order to meet the challenges of this new context, the virtual team has begun to emerge as a new form of structure, because it is assumed to bridge inter- and intraorganizational boundaries, to procure expert knowledge from internal and external sources, and to transfer “best practice” information nearly instantaneously (Huber, 1990). However, in spite of pressures for flatter structures, flexible employment strategies (Millward & Brewerton, 1999), empowerment, and semiautomated work guide considerations of virtual teamwork as a superior form of organizing, producing a “synergy bonus” (Conway & Forrestor, 1997), there is no clear-cut evidence for the superiority of virtual teamwork.

Moreover, despite the growing enthusiasm for virtual teams, little empirical research exists that explores the dynamics inherent in a virtual work environment (Watson-Fritz, Narasimhan, & Rhee, 1998). Models that could be used to understand better team development and effectiveness have been limited to those based on the traditional colocated group perspective. Although some comprehensive case studies exist documenting the development of virtual teams (O’Hara-Deveraux & Johansen, 1994; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997), theory development and empirical research are needed to help managers better understand and respond to the challenges that virtual teams face.

The atheoretical nature of virtual teamwork research may be attributable to the atheoretical nature of the field, including the conceptualization of virtual teams based on assumptions that underpin the conventional team literature. Virtual team models are based on the assumption that the team is a singular concrete entity characterized by stability, regular interaction, symbiosis, and team member proximity. However, in the case of virtual teams, these assumptions are inappropriate. We will try, therefore, to conceptualize the virtual way of working, arguing that the existence of a virtual team is more appropriately located in the mind of its members and stakeholders (i.e., psychological team), as opposed to a physical entity with presence and form (i.e., sociological team). At this end, we emphasize the importance of team cognition as a process in our understanding of effective virtual teamwork.

VIRTUAL TEAMS — CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

Whereas virtual teams undoubtedly face similar challenges to those of traditional teams, it is argued that these dispersed work groups may also face unique issues. More specifically, colocated collectivities are teams with members who are within close proximity of each other and for whom the dominant mode of communication is face-to-face. Members of colocated teams typically
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