Chapter VII

Human Resources
Advantages

Getting the Right Person for the Job Regardless of Location

Prior to the rise of virtual teams, hiring the right person for a job usually meant one of two things—limiting the pool of candidates or spending big bucks. Unless a company is willing to spend to fly people in for interviews or to pay for company moves, it must hire within commuting distance of its facility. This may work out okay if you are in an employer’s market and located in an area that has many people with the skill set for which you are looking (e.g., engineers in Silicon Valley). But what if it’s an employee’s market, and you’re located in an area that lacks employees with your required skill set? Most likely, you’ll end up compromising on what you really wanted in an employee. There is a big difference between the best available software engineer in Acworth, Georgia, and the best available software engineer in the Untied States.

The other non-virtual team option is to incur the expense of flying in candidates for interviews and (most likely) paying for their relocation, if they are from out of town (assuming you hire them, of course). We covered the joys of company-paid moves in the previous section.

If you’re willing to hire a remote employee—either as a telecommuter or a worker in a remote office—suddenly, your pool of qualified candidates soars, and there is no $42,000 in relocation expenses.

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Two key factors for promoting the use of geographically dispersed virtual teams in the last several years are the threat of terrorism (9/11) and the threat of disease (SARS). Both have had a profound effect on how corporations view the co-located vs. geographically dispersed argument, as well as casting doubt on the necessity of virtual teams meeting face-to-face from time to time.

Prior to 9/11, it seemed a reasonable idea to group large numbers of people together in a single building. Many executives viewed this as superior to the idea of dispersing people among many locations, with efficiency, cost savings, and team cohesiveness among the arguments. September 11 radically changed that perception for many people. Just as consolidating your data center into a single location provides a single point of failure in case of disaster, so also does consolidating all of your people into a single location provide a single point of failure. After the two towers fell, suddenly people began to question the idea that co-located teams are always better. And as companies began to recover from the horrible destruction, it was virtual teaming and telecommuting that helped them get back on their feet (a similar situation existed during the 2003 wildfires in southern California).

In one case, a major technology industry analyst firm was able to publish several in-depth papers on the potential impact of the attacks within 72-hours of the fall of the towers. The papers were entirely written through a geographically dispersed team. Somewhat ironically, the same industry analyst has stressed in the past the importance of periodic face-to-face meetings for virtual teams.

The grounding of the U.S. commercial air system for several days after the attacks were also an eye opener for many people. It actually created a situation where it was impossible for many people to meet face-to-face, and it was a requirement that they meet virtually—an interesting juxtaposition. In the first year or so after the attacks, many people were hesitant to get on an airplane for fear of a terrorist attack. When confronted with the option of advancing their career by traveling or keeping themselves safe from terrorist attacks, most people choose the latter—and learned to live with virtual meetings.

Just as people were getting comfortable getting on a plane again, the SARS virus hit in early 2003 (the virus infected 8,098 people, and 774 died). One of the greatest risk factors for contracting the SARS virus was international travel by plane. Many companies temporarily banned travel to known infected locations (including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Toronto). People who