Chapter XVII

Impact of Culture, Affiliation, and Shared Goals

As we mentioned in Section 1, technology provides only a portion of the solution for addressing the challenges of virtual teams. Team and organizational cultures are key indicators of the potential success of virtual teams, while shared goals provide a way to unify the group. Team affiliation, as we will see, plays a lesser part in ensuring the success of virtual teams but is a reality of the complex organizational structures we see today and evolving in the future.

Team Culture

In this discussion, we expand our definition of a team to include small groups of two to three people working together to thousands of people working in a large organization. In these team environments, the team leader or sponsor will determine the culture of the team. Sometimes this is called the team’s values, beliefs, or operating principles. How the team will work together is stated either explicitly in the culture or implicitly by the way teams or team members are rewarded. Sometimes, what is stated explicitly contradicts what happens in reality. For example, a company could say that it values diversity, but its hiring practices could imply that diversity is valued only to the extent that it doesn’t interfere with the homogeneity of the organization.
A virtual team can be successful only if the team leader or sponsor supports a virtual team model. In our experience, when there was strong sponsorship for working collaboratively in a virtual team environment, the team was most successful. Even if the team members are enthusiastic about a virtual team model, without strong sponsorship, the rewards and recognition system and lack of funding for tools discourage the continued operation in a virtual team environment.

Companies operate under many different models, but general preferences can be extrapolated by looking at where companies like to hire people. In January 2004, we went to the job Web sites of three global high-tech companies: HP, IBM, and Microsoft. We compared the total number of job openings with the number of job openings in the state where the company’s corporate office was located. At HP, 44% of the job openings were located in the same state as its corporate headquarters. At IBM, that percentage was 34%; at Microsoft, it was 82%. We compared this with similar data from years past and saw a similar pattern. Although this short survey was far from scientific, this type of analysis can give you an indication as to whether a company relies mostly on co-located teams or distributed teams in its day-to-day operations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of jobs in state (Mar 2002)</th>
<th>% of jobs in state (Jan 2004)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HP</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBM</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsoft</td>
<td>87</td>
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Virtual Out of Necessity

In some cases, teams are virtual out of necessity. Typically, small teams with limited resources or specialized knowledge need to rely on expertise and knowledge from other groups in order to accomplish their goals. The scientific and academic research community is an excellent example of how virtual teams can flourish. Experts in highly specialized fields must collaborate and share knowledge in order to further their research.
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