Do Virtual Teams Ever Need to Meet Face-to-Face?

In the prologue of this book, we asked the question, “Do virtual teams ever need to meet face-to-face?” Certainly, conventional wisdom has it that successful virtual teams need to meet face-to-face from time to time for things like project kickoffs, milestone meetings, and project celebrations—we’ve captured that viewpoint in earlier chapters of this book. But going forward, is it really a requirement, or as virtual teams become the norm, will the need fade? There is some evidence that in many organizations, meeting face-to-face is no longer a requirement for virtual teams.

A recent study at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, indicates that the face-to-face culture is important in hierarchical companies that evaluate individual (rather than group) achievement, but not important in team-oriented companies with flatter hierarchies. It is often postulated in academic articles (and used to support the idea of periodic face-to-face meetings for virtual teams) that “85% of human communication is nonverbal.” The University of Nijmegen study found that while the importance of nonverbal clues is important in situations that require negotiation or where an adversarial situation is likely, they are much less important in a virtual team situation where everyone has a common goal (and knows that evaluation will be based on the team, not individual, output). The conclusion of the University of Nijmegen study follows:

In conclusion, it is my contention that the one-sided stress in literature on the necessity of rich media seems to indicate the implicit assumption...