Chapter 16

New Approaches Needed to Support the Distributed Environment

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ABSTRACT

The key drivers that are causing organizations and individuals to migrate to the distributed workplace include high-speed networks, improved technology, disruptive technologies representing significant trends in the way technology is used, and the changing expectations of employees in the way they work, communicate, and collaborate. One of the major problems in managing distributed teams is an organization’s ability to recognize and adapt to changes. Another challenge is in placing the right types of people into distributed teams and creating processes to manage them. Significant changes in the types and uses of technology will require changes in leadership and management style. Companies will also need to recognize and manage employee issues of isolation and trust. A new value proposition is emerging in a disruptive technology environment, and companies will need to find ways to adapt to the challenges for their long-term viability.

The implications of all these changes are becoming clearer for HR development, education, and training functions. These changes will make it easier to share information and optimize knowledge creation. They will affect the continuing evolution of the workforce because access to the Internet and a laptop are no longer enough for successful management of a distributed team. Keeping up with change effectively is an important part of a company’s long-term plan. Forward-looking organizations will implement strategies to maximize the benefits of these changes and soften the negative effects. Well-managed distributed teams can be an integral part of a company’s strategy and can provide major benefits to the company.

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INTRODUCTION

The current major issues for distributed teams include rapid changes in technology, trust, the need for organizational skills, and the problems associated with isolation. Moreover, the rapid changes in technology are occurring as a result of a confluence of events that make them possible and open the way for a new value proposition. Disruptive technologies are innovations that unexpectedly change an existing technology, as first described by Harvard professor, Clayton M. Christensen in his book, *The Innovator’s Dilemma* (Christensen, 1997). The disruption comes from the technology’s ability to substantively change the way work is done. Disruptive technologies are now arriving in clusters, and the rate at which these technologies are coming to market has increased substantially.

The advent of personal computers and high-speed networks made it possible for workers and companies to take advantage of the benefits of distributed teams. The networks and technologies have continued to improve and proliferate. It is the impact of these technologies and the changing nature of the Internet that will require distributed teams to re-think how they will work together.

There are a number of disruptive technologies arriving in the marketplace in close sequence. Online is no longer an activity experienced only from the personal computer; it now includes smart phones and other new mobile devices. The online environment has new social spaces where people gather, collaborate, exchange information, learn, and work. Leveraging these innovations is not simply a matter of duplicating offline forms of communication to the online environment. These technologies bring opportunities and significant threats to any traditional organization, creating the need for a new value proposition in the workplace in order to address the use of social networking, collaborative software, mobile technology, and other innovations.

Trust is another, and equally important, major issue for distributed team development. It is a foundational value and the basis for successful teams. Well-developed organizational skills are also necessary to keep a distributed team productive and working at a high level. Finally, isolation is an issue that needs to be acknowledged and addressed at the front end of planning for a distributed team.

BACKGROUND

If managed properly, distributed teams provide the additional benefit of being a continuous source for bringing innovation into the company. They can also be critical in helping to fend off competitive threats that may emerge from new companies with new technologies. Companies need to understand the importance of training in order to reap these benefits. They also need to be alert to the new types of jobs and changes in processes, or even organizational structure, that new technologies will bring. Research has shown that, contrary to popular misconceptions, extroverted personalities perform better in distributed teams (Conlin, 2009). According to Conlin, introverts can also work well in distributed teams, but they need to be managed differently. They need to have technologies available that can reproduce a more traditional office environment in order to facilitate communications and foster better relationships.

Moreover, there are trends that are moving quickly to mainstream use that will have a profound effect on how we work and how a virtual workforce should be managed. The advent and popular use of social media as well as other new and emerging technologies are amplifying the power of personal networks and are changing the way work will be done. Individually, these trends will have an effect on the way people work; in combination, they will be very disruptive to traditional ways of working and will have a major effect on anyone managing a distributed team. The following list is not comprehensive but is included here to illustrate the number and type of