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<u>Team Research Report</u>

Virtual Team: Success and Failure Factors in Global Communication

Table of Contents

Abstract

Virtual teams have been in existence for a long time, and much research has been conducted in the field of virtual teams. This article will explore the factors to enable a virtual team to be successful, and how to prevent it from failure. The article will explain the need for virtual teams and why they are so important for a company. This paper will then discuss how the team moves from individual players to team players, and how they work together as a unit and build trust. The type of communication tools are an important factor for virtual teams and will be explored in depth. Providing team feedback and avoiding the potential failures that can happen on a virtual team will be discussed and explained.

Introduction

The landscape of technology companies has changed radically over the last decade. Companies are selecting the best and brightest engineers from around the world. Advances in technology have made it easier to quickly and easily transfer data. The resulting benefit is companies are no longer constrained by physical locale. Engineers are working in their native countries at an ever increasing rate.

At the same time, projects are getting more complicated. Gone are the days when one engineer could design an entire product. Instead teams of engineers are required to design a product in a timely manner. This was easier when everyone was located in the same building, but becomes problematic when dealing with teams separated not only by time zone, but language and culture as well. The resulting situation has given rise to the concept of virtual teams. Virtual teams are defined as "groups of people who collaborate closely even though they are separated by space, time, and organizational barriers." These teams are now proliferating around the world, thanks to modern communications technology. [1]

This paper will examine the ways that individuals learn to work together in a virtual environment. This will include the transition from individual to team contributor as well as overcoming the cultural barrier. This examination will include the tools available to facilitate virtual team collaboration. Finally, it will discuss the obstacles the teams face and the solutions that enable the teams to succeed.

From Individual to Team

In order to emerge as real teams, individuals should take risks involving conflict, trust, interdependence and hard work.[2] Team members need to trust each other with respect to the team's purpose. This is often defined within the team charter. Once the charter is developed it is important for everyone involved to trust that members are working towards the same goal. A lack of trust often leads to conflict.

As a result, conflict resolution is an important factor in team success. When someone addresses a conflict and people respond constructively the individual differences and concerns mold into common goal.

Interdependence means that team members need to be mutually responsible and share a common set of principle with respect to team's goal. This can only happen when team members trust each other and find ways to deal with conflict. When members do not trust and cannot resolve their conflicts, the team gets too wrapped up in wrong or right. This prohibits members from progressing on their specific team-related task.

Almost all team activity falls under two main topics: task accomplishment and team building. Task accomplishment is any activity that accomplishes work and moves the team toward its mission. Team building is any activity that builds and strengthens the team as a team. The experts agree that teams that focus on both sets of activities tend to be stronger and more successful over time. The driving force behind every team is a clear mission and vision. A mission is the task at hand what the team does as its purpose for existing. A vision is a mental image of a possible and desirable future state for the team that is better than what now exists.

The best teams have members who share a common understanding of the mission and vision, and have great clarity of how their mission and vision support those of the larger organization. Teams that perform poorly are frequently found to lack this common understanding.

To accomplish tasks effectively and efficiently, good teams develop operating processes. These are agreed-upon ways, such as sequential steps, to perform work, communicate, meet, arrive at decisions, problem-solve, resolve differences, apportion work, schedule activities, and more. For clarity, and to aid understanding, a team operating process is usually written or displayed.

Like other types of teams, Virtual teams need to have a good understanding from mission and vision in order to reach their goals.

Learning to Work Together

The Ordinary project team is complicated creature.[3] Members must figure out personal differences, find other members' strengths, balance commitments to the project against the demands of their everyday jobs and learn how to improve quality.

When a team is forming, members try to understand the boundaries of acceptable group behavior. This is the stage if transition from individual to member status. After a while they begin to realize the task, accept the team, team ground rules, their roles in the team and he individuality of fellow members. At last team members discover and accept each other's strengths and weakness, and learn how to work together to reach their goal.

In virtual teams this learning curve is punctuated by the fact that often the team members do not reside in the same locale. This complicates the process of building team cohesion. Team members may have to battle time-zone communication as well as cultural roadblocks.

Communication Tools for Virtual Teams

Fortunately there are number of tools available to simplify the communication process. A few of the more important tools that are used in today's virtual teams are looked at below.

Email

The most ubiquitous communication tool employed is email. This is still a reliable means of communication. Unfortunately a lot of personality is lost in email. This slows the team formation process because it takes longer to get to know someone via email. That said it is probably the best way to disseminate information to a large group.

Repositories

Email is often used to share files amongst teams, but the rise of repositories has given way to a better method. There are number of tools available that are tailored to file storage and revision control. Microsoft's SharePoint is a common one used in corporate culture. One of the more common models is to dedicate server space and to employee some means of version control, such as TortoiseSVN. In any revision system users download material from the repository rather than passing it through email. By doing this the version that is referenced can easily be monitored.

Teleconferencing

Teams used to rely on teleconferencing, but often the emotions of the meeting were lost. It was not technically feasible to use teleconference early on. The software to process the video was inadequate and the infrastructure to stream was lacking. Technological advances have led to increases in bandwidth that have made video conferencing reliable. Today teleconferencing is rich medium for virtual communication.

Skype

One of the more popular tools for communication is Skype. Skype is looking to grab a piece of the corporate telecommunications market by providing free or low-cost video, audio, and chat options.[4] The price associated with Skype makes it very desirable from a corporate perspective. Skype allows peer-to-peer chat capabilities. This is often utilized for quick communications. Voice over internet protocol (VOIP) is available when chat is not sufficient. This is broken down into a few different categories. Skype allows the user to speak directly with other Skype users, or to call telephone numbers. When using the Skype-to-Skype capabilities users can even host conference calls.

Skype has few more features that make it valuable for virtual teams. It has a built in chat history that is searchable. There is a video mode. This vital component helps ease the growing pains virtual teams often have since they never see each other in person. Finally, Skype offers a desktop sharing feature that is useful for showing and explaining technical documents.

Obstacles

Working on a virtual team presents a unique set of obstacles to overcome for everyone involved.   Not only do they need to manage conflict, trust, and interdependencies, but they need to do it while battling the "well-documented leadership challenges that stem from the need to deal with issues arising from their geographic dispersion, reliance on electronic media for communication, and nationality diversity."[5] These issues are highlighted in seemingly simple tasks. While all members of a team have to navigate the transition from an individual to a team contributor, the problems associated with this transition are often amplified in virtual teams. With members in Europe, the United States, and Asia things as simple as scheduling a meeting time can be difficult. Groups have to compromise by switching their schedules around.

After this basic problem is solved the team is still left trying to overcome the language barriers that slow the stream of information. Many times the team members have never met face-to-face so understanding the nuances of communication takes some time.   Team members have to learn how to work with each other before they can tackle the larger problem of designing their product.

Conclusion

The rise of the global economy has demanded that leaders in business recruit on an international level. Companies that are no longer tied to brick and mortar facilities need to reinvent how they perform. The first place this is evident is in team dynamics. Traditional teams are rare. Individuals are now required to fit into virtual teams.

Virtual teams are similar to traditional teams in a number of ways. The process of moving from individuals to a functioning team is still in place. Members need to trust each other. They need to work towards valuable constructive conflict resolution. The difference is they have to do this without the advantage of being in the same room.

Fortunately technology has grown in lockstep with virtual teams. Today's teams have access to tools that are powerful allies in teambuilding. Physical location is not as important when you can talk to and see someone anywhere in the world. The advances in version control allows for multiple users to modify files while maintaining a solid revision history.

These tools are valuable and they definitely help facilitate the growth of teams. But at the end of the day, these are only tools. Virtual teams still have to go through the growing pains that all teams go

through. The successful teams will simply be the ones that can appropriately use the available tools to accelerate the learning curve.

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