



Communication Across Spatially Dispersed Teams

KEYWORDS

Communication; Electronic Communication; Virtual Organisations; Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT *Communication is fundamental to any form of organising but is paramount in virtual organizations. Virtual organizations are characterised by highly dynamic processes, contractual relationships among entities and edgeless boundaries. Compared to traditional organisational settings, communication processes that occur in virtual organisations are expected to be rapid, customised, temporary, greater in volume and more formal. Typically, these organisations rely on computer mediated communication for communication because teams working on joint projects are spatially dispersed and have to communicate across space and time zones. Spatially dispersed teams, therefore, must overcome a number of barriers, such as geographical distances, trust issues, differing communication styles, and technology challenges. This research paper explores the inherent challenges in managing and communicating with members of a virtual team or workgroup, and reviews current literature to provide an overview of effective methods and practices for organisations seeking to improve the communication and effectiveness of such teams.*

Introduction & Literature Review

The development of the informational technology, globalisation, the constraints imposed by the international business environment, are phenomena that leave their mark on the management of the organisations. Nowadays, managers are constrained to take a series of decisions, both under the pressure of time and the pressure generated by the lack or shortage of financial human resources.

The phrase – man is the most important resource of an organisation – led to the transformation of the sustainable competitive advantage into a real riding hog for the managers that give the company outstanding performance over a period of time. Specialists come to the managers assistance suggesting that the virtual teams represent one of the solutions meant to lead to obtaining a long-run sustainable competitive advantage into organisations (Handy, 1995; Lipnack and Stamps, 2000; Skyrme, 2003).

Technology has created a double-edged sword for those who work in today's hyper-connected global economy. The positive effects of modern technology include its ability to cut through the dimensions of time and space and efficiently provide vast amounts of information nearly anywhere in the world within seconds. The negative effects include the severing of some aspects of interpersonal communication, among them immediate feedback, standards of etiquette, and an overall depersonalization of the process, as foretold by (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 1984).

However, companies that seek to remain relevant and competitive in this business setting are moving forward with organizational structures that are often more tangible on paper, such as in the organisational chart where they are drawn up, than they are in reality. Such is the nature of the nascent "virtual organisation," be it an ad hoc team that is working to address a specific product development or a more formalized organization that is bound together by a stated purpose and often little more.

Communication is an integral component of success for any team. Strong interpersonal communication has been associated with such valuable outcomes as increased trust, commitment to the workgroup and organisation, shared

expertise and ultimately improved performance. Organizational functioning is dependent upon the communicative relationships among individuals within that organisation because these relationships facilitate the dissemination of critical information and expertise that enables high performance (Brass D.J. et al., 2004).

Even though the traditional teams are losing more and more ground to the virtual teams, one cannot affirm that their existence is in danger. The fact of combining and modeling the advantages of the two types of teams – virtual and classic/traditional – leads to an efficient utilisation of the human resources of an organisation. This research paper will examine some of the challenges that are faced by virtual organisations and teams, and provide an overview of strategies that appear to be working to help bring people together virtually and overcome the communication hurdles that are inherent in these relatively new workgroups.

Definitions

Virtual Organisation

A virtual organisation is an organisation involving detached and disseminated entities (from employees to entire enterprises) and requiring information technology to support their work and communication (Gupta and Jatinder, 1997). Virtual organisations do not represent a firm's attribute but can be considered as a different organizational form. Unfortunately, it is quite hard to find a precise and fixed definition of fundamental notions such as virtual organisation or virtual company (Afsarmanes. H and Camarinha. M, 2004). The term virtual organisation ensued from the phrase "virtual reality", whose purpose is to look like reality by using electronic sounds and images (Greenberg. D and Heneman. R, 2002). The term virtual organisation implies the novel and innovative relationships between organisations and individuals. Technology and globalisation both support this particular type of organisation (Oxford University Press, 2014).

Virtual can be defined as "not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so" (Burn, J et al., 2002) in other words "unreal but looking real" (Afsarmanesh. H et al., 2005). This definition precisely outlines

the leading principle of this unconventional organisation, which holds the form of a real (conventional) corporation from the outside but does not actually exist physically and implicates an entirely digital process relying on independent web associates (Afsarmanesh. H et al., 2005). Thus, virtual organisations are centred on technology and position physical presence in the background. Virtual organisations possess limited physical resources as value is added through (mobile) knowledge rather than (immovable) equipment (Greenberg. D and Heneman. R, 2002). Virtual organisations necessitate associations, federations, relations, agreements and alliance relationships (Oxford University Press, 2014) as they essentially are partnership webs of disseminated organisational entities or self-governing corporations (Afsarmanesh. H et al., 2005).

Virtual Team

A virtual team (also known as a geographically dispersed team, distributed team, or remote team (Nevogt, Dave, 2013) is a group of individuals who work across time, space and organisational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technology (Lipnack, 2000) and (Jessica, 1997). Powell, Piccoli and Ives in 2004 define virtual teams in their literature review article "as groups of geographically, organisationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organisational tasks. Ale Ebrahim.N, Ahmed.S and Taha. Z in a 2009 literature review paper, added two key issues to definition of a virtual team "as small temporary groups of geographically, organizationally and/ or time dispersed knowledge workers who coordinate their work predominantly with electronic information and communication technologies in order to accomplish one or more organisation tasks". Members of virtual teams communicate electronically and may never meet face-to-face. In the 1990's, many companies such as Goodyear, Motorola, Texas Instruments, and General Electric "had begun exporting the team concept to their foreign affiliates...[in order to] integrate global human resources practices" (Ahmed et al, 2009, p. 2654). There are, of course, varying degrees of virtuality from working from home on occasion to take care of a sick child to the "highest degree of virtuality [in which] all members work apart from each other in distant locations and *only* communication and interact through CMC" (Bery, 2011, p. 188).

Organisational Communication

An accepted definition of organisational communication is adopted and expanded from a reference by the International Association of Business Communicators, in that organizational communication transcends the emails, memos and presentations shuttled through the workplace and takes on a much greater interpersonal scope. Organisational communication is relationship-based and includes such factors as emotion, behavior and human psychology (Gillis, 2006, p. 297).

Challenges & Implications for Virtual Team

Virtual teams face particular challenges involving trust (Malhotra et al., 2007, Bal and Teo, 2001b, Paul et al., 2004b) which is a key element to build successful interactions and to overcome selfish interests, effective communication (Beranek and Martz, 2005, Dustdar, 2004) that is even more critical for success in the virtual setting (Shachaf and Hara, 2005), deadlines (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999), and team cohesiveness (Dineen, 2005). While there are great advantages that come with the adoption of the virtual teams, new challenges rise with them (Precup et al.,

2006). Cascio (2000) declared that there are five main disadvantages to a virtual team: lack of physical interaction, loss of face-to-face synergies, lack of trust, greater concern with predictability and reliability, and lack of social interaction. In building a virtual team, all of these issues must be at least implicitly addressed in order to have an effective virtual team (Hunsaker and Hunsaker, 2008). Virtual teams are challenged because they are virtual; they exist through computer mediated communication technology rather than face-to-face interactions (Gaudes et al., 2007, Hardin et al., 2007). Sometimes they report to different supervisors and they function as empowered professionals who are expected to use their initiative and resources to contribute to accomplishment of the team goal (Hunsaker and Hunsaker, 2008). Fewer opportunities for informal work- and non-work-related conversations may form challenges to virtual team (Furst et al., 2004). Furthermore, virtual team members are expected to become more independent, successfully negotiate cultural differences (Dafoulas and Macaulay, 2002, Dekker et al., 2008), and accomplish their tasks through computer-mediated technology (Hunsaker and Hunsaker, 2008). The process to motivate team members may differ depending on their orientation (Paul et al., 2004a).

When interactions are limited to e-mail, instant messaging or other computer-mediated communications, breakdowns are bound to happen in a virtual context (Lojeski and Reilly, 2008). In the virtual team environment, the advantage of interpersonal communication, facial expressions, body language, etc are solely missed and the team members are deprived of this body sport during their interactions.

If there is not a high degree of trust or shared sense of purpose among the team members, non-tech savvy team members may be wary of requesting assistance or revealing what could be assumed as a weakness. A virtual team that relies heavily on computer-mediated communication and technology for collaboration and teamwork will have all the chances of not performing at their very best and at the same time lose interpersonal touch. Managers of virtual teams consider these issues while finding out the right balance for a team outside of the traditional office setting.

Ironically, while virtual teams are often seen as capable of bridging multiple time zones to create the archetypal twenty four hours and seven days workflow, in many cases it takes longer for these teams to get things done precisely because of the gaps in time and distance. As one manager from multinational company expressed, "People are working in different time zones, which means that decisions or actions take that bit longer. Managers have to remember to account for this in their planning and scheduling" (Melcrum, 2003, p. 37)

To recapitulate, the three critical and essential elements that are likely to have a significant impact on the potential of virtual teams to thrive or fail are *trust*, a *shared vision*, and *effective use of technology* to facilitate the interactions and performance of the team. Each of these can have implications for the behavior of individuals on the team and if any of the above elements is compromised, then, it will have a telling effect on the organizational growth.

Effective Communication Strategies

Effective communications in a virtual context begin with an environmental scan to ensure that the workforce is accurately identified, and that their differences (cultural,

geographical or organizational) are identified and channelised into the organisational strategy. In most of the cases, organisations are not fully aware of the number of virtual workers they have, and as a result this group can be forgotten if proactive measures are not taken (Kernaghan, Clutterbuck and Cage, 2001). Best practice organizations actively involve their virtual workers in the design of organizational communication processes and resources that will best facilitate their ability to interact and stay engaged, and they have management support both philosophically and financially (Kernaghan, Clutterbuck & Cage, 2001).

Effective communication is the backbone of a successful virtual team or workgroup, and without it any sort of successes are likely to be overshadowed by underperformance of individual team members. Additionally, it is incumbent upon the team manager to clearly define roles and responsibilities along with expectations as the team is brought together (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998). This is further reinforced in the Melcrum study in which the following key challenges are outlined for managers of virtual teams: *creating clarity of role, synchronizing work efforts, building and maintaining effective communication interfaces* with the team. If these issues are not addressed, it will likely result in decreases of motivation, clarity, trust and connection to the organisational goals (2003, p. 54).

The following is a list of the guidelines presented in the Melcrum study to assist managers in developing an effective communication strategy for their spatially dispersed teams:

- Create opportunities for people to get to know each other on a personal level.
- Have a clear system for recognising and managing misunderstandings.
- Anyone who feels upset or uncomfortable about e-communications from another virtual team member has a responsibility to share that concern openly, with a view to building greater understanding.
- Keep the team relatively small – no more than eight to 10 people. The larger the virtual team, the more likely it is to fragment into uncoordinated smaller groups.
- Have clear and frequent processes for reflection and review.
- Hold virtual team meetings on a regular basis, just as you would with a face-to-face team.
- Do not overly rely on e-mail. Expect people to talk in person, by telephone or video conference, at least once every few weeks. (2003, p. 110)

According to Melcrum (2003), the four elements that are equally important in shaping an effective communication strategy for remote and virtual workers are: *clarity of purpose, effective interfaces, effective information sharing, and the communication behavior* of organisational leaders.

- At the team level, *clarity of purpose* answers the question, "What do we need to achieve in this unit and why?" It also addresses values and sets the tone for how the team will interact.
- The *effective interfaces* referred to include the interac-

tions among the team members, the relationship of the team with its adjacent and supported business units, and a sense of connectivity with the corporate headquarters or regional office.

- With respect to *information sharing*, it is vital that the team is receiving the information needed to perform their roles and the team's mission, and that information is received in a timely manner.
- Finally, the *communication behavior* of top management will both fully support and actively contribute to the success of the virtual teams and workgroups, or it may simply fall into the "out of sight, out of mind" pattern where the team feels abandoned or irrelevant.

The team leader must actively seek the support of top management and convey this sense of support to the team members consistently (Melcrum, 2003). When structured correctly, the virtual team environment can create a number of benefits for its members, such as improved flexibility and work-life balance, reduced travel requirements, and a less distracting setting for productive, knowledge intensive work (Melcrum, 2003). Some of the methods suggested for overcoming "virtual distance" include face-to-face meetings, teamwork coordination, team development, etc., with a focus on organizational communication. As most of the communication between members of a spatially dispersed team will be computer-mediated, particularly through e-mail and other social networking media, it is important to provide training in effective use of these media to maintain the required norms and etiquette for team communications. Team members must ensure that their communications are intelligible and can be understood by others who may not fully appreciate the context in which an e-mail or missive is written (Lojeski and Reilly, 2008).

Conclusion

Spatially dispersed Teams have unquestionable advantages as its' flexibility, a chance of better knowledge managing by giving its members' more autonomy, fast exchange of ideas, global cooperation, constant 24 hour work. Virtual communication contributes to less time and efficiency losses. It does not require so much money for traveling. Virtual communication can help also in maintaining the work-life balance that is disturbed when frequent travels are a must (Andriessen, 2007b). The dispersed nature of virtual teams creates an inherent barrier to communication that must be overcome through efforts such as the implementation of proper technologies and the establishment of recognised communication networks.

Hence, it is crucial to use the appropriate methods of communication for the concrete task we want to realize, enhance the awareness of the users of the virtual communications, and provide them with appropriate trainings and feedback. We cannot forget that a virtual team is not a virtual creature and that it is composed by real persons, what is more, often by experts and the face-to-face contact is sometimes the only way to resolve emerging problems. In this paper, the author has highlighted a few strategies that can be employed for fostering a strong communication climate within virtual teams. I suggest that organizations take heed of these suggestions and supplement them with efforts to encourage the development of effective communication networks throughout the organisation.

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