<u>Importance of Organizational Communications: Virtual Work Environments</u>

By: Bailee M. Underwood

Over the past decade, a prevalent shift has occurred in discussions relating to organizational structures. The Covid 19 pandemic amplified this trend significantly and today we are living in a world where organizations must decide their next steps, and these decisions could be detrimental to their success. The era of Virtual Workplaces is upon us and it is not a discussion generation Z and even millennials won't allow to subside. Discussions relating to work-life balance, sustainability effects and diversity have proven the importance of the virtual workplace, and organizations are at a crucial point in their journey where they must learn to adapt or risk being left behind in an age of traditional workplace environments.

In order to fully understand the complexities of a virtual workplace, we must begin with the very definition of a successful organization and its components. In a study conducted through the People and Strategy Journal, authors Ferrel and Kline dove into some of the core components of successful organizations relating to communication. The topic of "Team Trust" became a focal point in their research. Kline explained that peak performance in a company is heavily reliant on that organization's trust amongst their employees. This trust opens their organization up for a wealth of potential success as "people who trust their peers are more likely to demonstrate risk-taking behaviors that enable team excellence" (Ferrell, J., & Kline, K.). This risk taking

behavior is what allows companies to compete in today's markets and more importantly, it allows the organization's workers to feel safe in instances where the inevitable failures may occur.

While this dynamic team trust theory may be crucial to organizational success, concerns still present themselves as we bridge this theory towards our shift to a virtual workplace. Many people have expressed concerns relating to the effectiveness of building team trust through virtual work environments. Challenges such as time zone differences limiting opportunities for synchronous communication, or even fewer informal interaction opportunities are just a few of the many concerns relating to the team trust barriers.

While these conversations are very prevalent, we must remember that change inevitably presents challenges and change itself is unavoidable. If we are to look at the traditional workplace environment, companies are facing many challenges, however these challenges are due to backlash as this generation's workers are becoming more and more aware of the needed shift towards a virtual workplace. Companies are facing issues relating to these traditional organizational environments including work-life balance of their employees, sustainability concerns and even diversity of skill sets and people. When an organization is working through traditional organizational methods, its ability to have the most diverse team and attract members of various cultures and skillsets is extremely limited by geographical barriers. Not to mention that traditional workplace environments often require commutes from their employees which costs them valuable time and causes negative impacts on our environment. This being just a small part of the overall challenges facing traditional workplaces, it is crucial these organizations

shift their challenges in a direction which has potential to set their organization up for long term success.

An interesting study was performed in the Turkish subsidiary of an international company based in Germany which presented itself with some new and fascinating data revolving around these concerns and challenges. The Turkish company based out of Istanbul and Turkey agreed to take part in an organizational communication research project while they transitioned their workplace environment from a traditional style to a virtual environment. This organization was converted to a majority virtual workplace with 65 of the 100 total workers going virtual, while the remainder continued to work in the traditional style work environment. The virtual workers were able to work whenever and wherever they desired. The research group used a common questionnaire called the Downs and Hazen's (1977) Communication Satisfaction test to examine 5 sub-components related to organizational communication satisfaction amongst all organization workers (virtual and traditional workers included). These components consisted of communication climate, personal feedback, relationship with supervisor, horizontal communication, and organizational integration. It was hypothesized that virtual workers would score lower satisfaction levels in all 5 areas of focus when compared to traditional environment workers. These hypotheses were concluded due to the extensive focus of negative impacts of organizational communication which were circulating at the time of this study. To the researchers' surprise, these hypotheses failed to be proven factual. "For every factor, the virtual office workers scored significantly higher in satisfaction than the traditional office workers" (Akkirman, A. D., & Harris, D. L.). This rather new finding was significant as it shifted the study

in its nature from organizational communication satisfaction towards the organization's virtual workplace implementation scheme along with the importance of effective organizational communication.

As researchers gathered information regarding these rather unique satisfaction results of their organizational communication, their focus shifted towards a thorough understanding of this organization's procedural implementation of their virtual workplace. This organization took a carefully researched, patient approach implementing a two year process to ensure they followed expert advice along the way. This company's focus was primarily gauged towards its workers and their overarching needs to complete the organizational tasks. Recognition was made that this system is completely new and required a clean slate of what is expected and considered necessary. This company's commitment to an effective organizational communication process while instilling support of team trust and their workers needs was the key to their successful implementation.

The process in which this organization took was a direct 5 step approach, which stemmed as a result of effective listening to experts as well as their companies needs. The first step of this process was the establishment of information technology and network infrastructures and required ongoing training. This firm took steps recommended by researchers and consultants including upper level support, ample and appropriate technology and technological support, extensive culture training as well as technical training and even provided extra social support systems to reduce alienation throughout this new environmental undertaking (Akkirman, A. D.,

& Harris, D. L.). Following this, the company shifted toward their second phase and shifted its organizational structure from functionally-based organization to a process‑based organization. What this allowed was for employees to take an entire process from start to finish in one rapid flow. This created an organization where workers were empowered and a traditional organizational hierarchy as mentioned in Miller's Textbook was eliminated. Instead they adopted a coaching leadership style where "the leader invests their time and energy into developing individual team members focusing on how their role plays a part in the larger team strategy"(Debara, D.). This organizational leadership method mimics the participative organization leadership discussed in the textbook by Katheryn Miller (Miller, K.), and is crucial in the implementation of this organization's shift towards a virtual workplace. As a third step in their implementation process, this company adopted a managing by results system which altered focus from processes and time‑based measurement standards to result‑based measurement standards. This approach encompasses the understanding that there are numerous ways for things to be completed, dictating that process is an overstep of upper level management and unsupportive in their newly developed managerial system. Allowing people the creative freedom to be managed by their results gives workers a stronger sense of purpose in the company and promotes their overall individuality. The fourth approach relates back to my discussion on the study of team trust and how this can be supported through implemented Systems focused around two components, communication focused technology and coordination focused technology. "Communication-focused technology is the backbone of trust-building communications in virtual teams" (Ferrell, J., & Kline, K.), and includes a vast range of options which can closely imitate in-person interactions. These technologies are important in sustaining a level of

horizontal informal communication amongst workers in an organization, however also support

necessary formal communications as well. "Coordination-focused technology refers to a

complementary set of tools that can be leveraged more peripherally to enhance trust and

coordination among team members" (Ferrell, J., & Kline, K.). These technological systems

allow workers to gain trust by having access to shared documents, systems and overall allow

people to check for themselves on the status of projects and work. These systems include project

management software, desktop virtualization, file sharing or co-creation tools, and even

scheduling tools. Lastly, this organization used step five to successfully launch Turkey's first ever

virtual workplace which as mentioned previously began a revolution towards a shift of virtual

workplaces across the globe. This organization showed the world that organizations can not only

function through these virtual organization environments, but they can thrive in business and in

employee satisfaction levels.

      The overall success of this organization's implementation was heavily reliant on a number

of factors, including their commitment to their employees satisfaction, the research and

development of this new area of organizational virtual workplaces, as well as their determination

to uphold an effective organizational communication system before, during and after this

structural shift. Virtual teams represent remarkable opportunities for the modern organization,

helping to resolve many workplace challenges, inevitably presenting its own set of challenges.

However, by following the five step process outlined through this study, organizations can begin

their shift towards a system that will sustain the future generations.

Citations

Akkirman, A. D., & Harris, D. L. (2005, June 1). Organizational communication satisfaction in

the virtual workplace. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from

https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/02621710510598427/full/h

tml?casa_token=Lu3q9nuUpa0AAAAA%3Ao2HL7kExTZJXxaJRkl4uESP2bY7

nNO8AdF_BQvmY5kuo0mOmxPqN5oi_3gMB1X7P2Tb-jh61m8r9Vcs2fq97Ii3

xTUbEX9hQcjXn60Ru7y0VCYaFwJI

Debara, D. (2022, June 24). *Coaching leadership style: Examples and skills to get started*.

Coaching Leadership Style: Examples and Skills to Get Started. Retrieved

December 12, 2022, from

https://www.betterup.com/blog/coaching-leadership-style-examples

Ferrell, J., & Kline, K. (2018). *Trust Communication - Society for Human Resource

Management*. Facilitating Trust and Communication in Virtual Teams . Retrieved

December 12, 2022, from

https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/people-strategy-journal/Spring2018/Pa

ges/trust-communication.aspx

Miller, K. (2015). *Organization communication: Approaches and processes*. Cengage.