

Managing Virtual Teams

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson you will learn how virtual teams differ from traditional teams and some of the challenges involved in managing virtual teams. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Managing Virtual Teams

Virtual teams have become much more common in recent years. Widespread high-speed access to the global Internet, in addition to cloud-based file sharing and web conferencing software, have made virtual teams an everyday reality for many organizations. This is particularly true in industries where work can be performed remotely with relative ease, including most knowledge-based professional work. It has become as easy to work from a home office (or easier) than from a centralized office location. A virtual team is simply a team which works remotely using the Internet and various means of electronic or digital communication and coordination.

Recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 have accelerated this process. Many organizations who had not already adapted at least part of their operations around virtual teams had to quickly adapt to virtual teaming in order to survive the global pandemic. Indeed, many of those organizations which failed to adapt did not survive. It is now expected that hybrid forms of work where one offices at home part-time and offices at a central location part-time will become the norm.



TERM TO KNOW

Virtual Team

A team which works remotely using the Internet and various means of electronic or digital communication and coordination.

2. Challenges of Managing Virtual Teams

With all their advantages related to flexibility and resilience to external shocks like the pandemic, managing virtual teams or forming virtual organizations is not without its own unique set of challenges. There are issues associated with worker isolation, career mobility and visibility, motivation, and performance. For example, how does a manager know for sure that an employee who is “working from home” on any given day is not simply out walking their dog or going for a run at the company’s expense? Some jobs provide the ability for closely monitoring time working remotely using special software (e.g., customer service and some data entry positions), but many do not. Further, is everyone a good fit for working from home on their own? Some

workers are, and some are not.

All said, hiring and staffing for virtual work is paramount when it comes to managing and leading virtual teams. There must be a high degree of trust between the manager and workers that the job will get done as required. Otherwise, there can be a tendency for workers to “hide” while they are supposed to be working, and managers to micromanage or overmanage which can be highly demotivating and self-destructive for managers and workers alike.

Managers need to be especially careful when hiring and staffing virtual teams. They need to be certain that virtual team members have the discipline and technical expertise/tools to get the job done on time and within budget. Many people like to think that they can work from home. But, in reality, only individuals who have demonstrated their ability to do so effectively and reliably should be considered for a virtual team or when staffing a virtual organization.

Establishing clear deadlines is necessary when managing virtual teams, since otherwise, it is just too easy and tempting to let the work slip. Home offices are, after all, “home”—where there are often many distractions. The most successful members of a virtual team approach their jobs as if they were going into a centralized office every day. They adhere to specific work hours, maintain detailed daily task or “to-do” lists, and have a designated work space—ideally separated from the rest of their home, if possible. They also tend to have above-average technical skills, since there is usually no readily available IT support team in one’s home!

While virtual teams and traditional teams do share many of the same group dynamics and basic characteristics, they can differ greatly in terms of team performance if not properly staffed and managed. The work has to be done, whether in a virtual team or a traditional team. And if the work is not done, the entire organization suffers.



BIG IDEA

Managers can make virtual teams more effective by understanding the basic principles of team dynamics, combined with careful staffing of virtual teams with members who have the “right stuff” to work virtually, combined with some basic performance monitoring tools in the form of productivity software (depending on the nature of the job) or even simply by establishing clear expectations and accountability for meeting important deadlines.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that widespread high-speed access to the global Internet, in addition to cloud-based file sharing and web conferencing software, have made virtual teams—a team which works remotely using the Internet and various means of electronic or digital communication and coordination—an everyday reality for many organizations. Therefore, **managing virtual teams** is an everyday reality for many managers as well. However, you learned that there are some unique **challenges of managing virtual teams**, involving issues associated with worker isolation, career mobility and visibility, motivation, and performance. Managers need to carefully staff virtual teams with members who have the discipline and technical expertise/tools to work virtually, as well as set clear expectations and deadlines for their team members.

Best of luck in your learning!



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