Virtual Teams: Boon or Bane?

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Citation Details

Muraleedharan, Krishna Priya; Vishnubhatta, Satvik; Mandhani, Smitha; and Deodhar, Unmesh, "Virtual Teams: Boon or Bane?" (2017). *Engineering and Technology Management Student Projects*. 1145.  
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/etm_studentprojects/1145

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Virtual Teams: Boon or Bane?

Team Research Report

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1. Abstract
A virtual team is a group of people who work together across time, space and organizational boundaries. Virtual teams came into existence as the work expertise is distributed globally and it provides more flexibility to the employees. The members of a virtual team have varied skills and they work towards achieving a common goal.
To explain the challenges faced by virtual teams we have studied research papers and case study for whom the only economically and practically means of communication was asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication. This research paper highlights the challenges of making and keeping trust in a virtual team whose team members are in different time, in different space and from different culture. The outcome was that virtual teams face a type of swift trust but such trust can be broken quickly and easily. This research also, discusses the challenges which will be faced by the leader of virtual teams. This is an important aspect because now, in virtual teams, leader will have new challenges to establish the leadership. Few reasons are because, it is difficult to get the leader’s presence recognized in the virtual environment. Also there are other aspects such as, there are no particular roles defined for this system. Thus it makes difficult for a leader to play the role.
In our research we examine how the new downsized organizational environments have replaced the traditional face to face teams and utilized the new telecommunication technologies to bring up a virtual organization. And how the concept of virtual teams aligns with the employees who are more familiar and interested in making use of the emerging technologies in their workplace.

2. Introduction
A virtual team is an advanced way of communication which is a result of development in information and communication technology. Virtual teams are formed when team members are located in different places with different time zones and with different cultures. This teams are formed for a specific amount of time and gets dissolved when the project is over. In virtual teams members communicate electronically across space, culture on a short term basis without any prior common history or anticipated future.
There is no specific line, if crossed, you can say the team is a virtual team. We only have something called as the degree of “virtualness” for every team. Teams are virtual in broadly 4 aspects. Geographical dispersion, temporal dispersion, cultural dispersion and organizational dispersion. Thus, we can say that, a team is virtual in the context of how they are distributed geographically. Is there any time difference between the team members working together? Are the team members from culturally different background. And are these team members organizationally dispersed?
As companies are expanding rapidly across the world the concept of virtual teams help them to hire people to work from different locations instead of bringing them all together which is not possible always. In this challenging and highly turbulent business environment, virtual teams have all the characteristics like flexibility, responsiveness, lower costs and improved resource.
utilization which are required to meet the ever-changing project requirements. So we have researched about virtual teams and tried to figure out if it is a boon or bane.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Trust

If there is trust among the team members then any virtual team can perform well as face-to-face teams. Trust is the way by which the geographic distance of virtual team members does not become psychological distance. If there is trust among the team members then the team members are not worried to take risks. A person can trust his team members if they are committed towards all the commitments made by the team, if they are honest with each other and if they do not take advantage of other team members when they have a chance. The lack of past and future connection decreases the presence of trust among team members. The diversity in cultural and geographic backgrounds also challenges the presence of trust among team members. To develop trust among team members characteristics like recursive interactions, shared social norms and experiences are required. The teams with high levels of trust in the starting and at the ending appeared to be more capable of managing the unpredictability, complication, and predictability of the virtual environment when compared with the teams with low levels of trust in the starting and at the ending. Virtual teams usually have to deal with inception, problem solving, conflict resolution and execution. Teams that have high trust can solve this problems easily\cite{3}.

3.2 Communication

As the virtual teams have members from different parts of the world there will be cross culture difference in their communication behaviours. Different people from different cultures will have different way of communication and different group behaviour like the way they exchange their personal information. The important point of cultural variability is individualism and collectivism. In individualistic cultures, the needs, values, and goals of the individual take importance over the needs, values, and goals of the ingroup. Whereas, in collectivist cultures, the needs, values, and goals of the ingroup take importance over the needs, values, and goals of the individual\cite{9}. Cultural exposure also affects communication behaviour. We can say that culturally experienced person helps develop trust in the team\cite{3}.

As we communicate with each others using electronic media it makes cultural differences irrelevant like as we don't face each other so the cultural differences like different dressing sense, gestures and greeting are eliminated. As we use written medium to communicate most of the times it eliminates the effect of different accents of people from different cultural backgrounds and as we communicate using mails or massages there will be less language errors\cite{3}. So we can conclude that communication using electronic media eliminates some cultural differences.

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3.3 Technology and the workplace of the future

Virtual teams are linked through advanced computer and communication technology, enabling teams to be more flexible and employees to be distributed geographically. Companies benefit from virtual teams as now they have access to best talent which was previously unavailable. In the recent years, many organizations were downsizing and trying to obtain a flat structure\textsuperscript{[11]}. This will have an effect on the amount of work done. The inefficiency that would have come here is flattened by using inter organizational network. Majority of the companies use team structure to carry out work efficiently\textsuperscript{[10]}.

Virtual teams also align with the thoughts of the modern human being who has grown up with cell phones, personal computers and expect organizational flexibility. The technologically sophisticated individuals will expect the same from the organization too\textsuperscript{[12]}. Teleworkers are an example where people work from home so as to save time by not going through the traffic daily\textsuperscript{[13]}.

The increasing importance of global trade and corporate activity has changed the working environment of many organizations. The main technologies used by virtual teams can be categorized to desktop videoconferencing systems (DVCS), collaborative software systems and Internet/Intranet systems\textsuperscript{[14]}. Even though virtual teams can be made possible with simple email and phone conversation, more complex communication systems like DVCS are included to replicate the face to face communication method. DVCS is an affordable and simple communication choice for an organization\textsuperscript{[15]}. Apart from audio and video conferencing, it also allows to share information and applications.

There are few challenges associated with virtual teams. The team members will be challenged to adapt to the new telecommunication and technologies that they use. The team members must have new ways to understand others in a virtual environment as there are no more facial signals\textsuperscript{[19]}. Every team member should be having good team participation and communication skills. For a good team it will require that the members should be those who can get used to a team quickly.

In virtual teams the members are likely from different parts of the world and hence have different cultural background. This will pose challenges and will need extra effort to understand the culture of the members and the way they interact. As the world gets more innovative and better technologies evolve, the way interactions happen in virtual teams will improve. At the same time there will be cost reduction and less learning curve to use them\textsuperscript{[17]}. Nowadays we have people doing more of online shopping which shows how more people are getting into virtual mode. In this changing tech savvy world virtual team will become more of a main organization form rather than just a new source of team management with few advantages.

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3.4 Leadership in virtual teams

Leadership is another very important aspect of the team. Thus, it is very important to understand how the leadership will change (or not) in the virtual teams. There are several issues to consider. There are mainly four issues that are important to understand the range of possibilities for leadership in virtual teams: roles, leader presence, team process and technology.[1]

Roles: From different studies it is revealed that, in virtual teams, majority of the members are not sure about the role they are playing or they will play during a particular session. Thus, it becomes difficult for a leader. Moreover, there are several softwares which assist teams to collaborate with each other. However, the studies have found that, such softwares, themselves have some roles in the team such as a gatekeeper.[18] However, more shocking result is that, such softwares even take the role of a leader in some cases. This changes the entire meaning of the leadership in the virtual teams. However, it is not the only issue.

Presence: One of the important things about leadership is the presence. The leader has to make sure that his/her presence is being recognized by the other members in the team. This is observed in the non virtual teams by where the leader sits in the meeting, what does the leader wear, office locations, body language, and so on. Thus, this becomes difficult to observe in the virtual environment. Because of obvious reasons, some of them are simply impossible to achieve. Thus, now there is a different kind of presence which has to be established in order to have the same effect in the team. This is also called as the “telepresence”.[18] The best way to establish such thing is to choose a technology which will be more creative in the sense of its vividness. The goal is to present the leader in front of the team as realistically as possible.

Process: The types of support that are provided by most groupware tools on the market today fall into the three broad categories: communication support, information processing and processing structuring. Process structuring tools should provide tools for such team activities such as agenda setting, agenda enforcement and facilitation.[19]

Technology: Communication technology is often defined in terms of the richness. Face to face interaction is considered as the best possible media.

3.5 Case study

Our research includes two case studies on how communication, trust, Leadership and technology plays a crucial role in the journey of virtual teams.

This case study is related to VirtusaPolaris from US and India region, a large multinational service based company that provides case management solutions. This case is based on offshore and on-site teams. The study is towards the aspect of communication and leadership in virtual teams. For a project solution, an automation team needs to work with another team which works from US and geographically virtual to the team in India. Both teams should coordinate among each other and meet the project deadlines. The onsite team is more experienced.
compared to offshore. Due to this, there was high power distance. All the team members were moderate and has previous work experience with different virtual teams. The power distance did not affected team’s progress. The fresh joiners in the offshore team could be able to learn from their team leaders on how to communicate and build trust with the other team. There was tele-conference as the available option of communication. Knowledge-sharing was a challenging part only with tele-conference. Leadership roles from both teams is an advantage because one person handling two teams will have a chance of conflict and the progress may get affected. During time-offs of team members, their teams gradually involve another resource in the conference and share knowledge. This helps in multiple ways like team dynamics will be consistent.

The above case discusses positivity in virtual teams. Let us also consider another case study which has different perspective on virtual teams. This case study is not based on a large company. This is based on a team which is trying grow as a startup. There is a prototype software which can be re-designed to build a product and can be marketed for investment. It is a team of four with a leader. All of the three members are geographically virtual. In the early stages of team building, the team has leader and an engineer from US who are in the same time zone. Later, the other team members joined from Phillipines and India. With multiple time zones, team meetings does not have great to scope to match a convenient time for everyone. This is one of the challenges team had. At times, team leader had to reach them individually. This created a conflict of trust among the team members. The work progress is little slower during the early days. Later technology came into support for maintaining weekly tasks. Leadership involves good decision-making skills, but in this team there were few cases where the decisions went wrong. Team was inconsistent in terms of duration of a team member being the part of a team. A product is considered to be well developed when a team is more committed and consistent in developing it. But the team leader did not make sure about the long-term commitments of the team members. This played a crucial role to degrade the progress of finishing the product. Thus, the team could not reach their goals due to the challenges.

4. Research Questions

We see that, now, number of virtual team and the degree to which the teams are virtual are more. And they are increasing day by day. This leads us to a question that, how these teams will perform? Will there be any loss or will there be a significant benefit? How the different aspects of the team will be affected by this change? These aspects could be leadership in virtual team, communication in such teams, the technology they use. This paper will describe about such scenarios.

5. Research Design

We are doing this research using various research papers who has conducted research on how, when and what are the virtual teams. We have collected these papers from different sources on internet. We are doing this as a research project for our course communication and team
building. We are focusing on papers which have discussed and researched on various virtual team building characteristics like trust, communication, advantages, disadvantages and how virtual teams are taking over face-to-face teams. We studied two cases which are experiences from one of the authors. The case studies provide real-time examples to the aspects that are discussed as part of this research. This research paper will help people to understand what a virtual team is, what characteristics are required to build a virtual team by discussing why it is important to build trust among team members in virtual teams, why it is important to have good communication to eliminate the cultural diversity among virtual team members, how the technological advancements enable employees to expect working in a virtual mode which makes virtual teams a main organizational form and this paper will also discuss how the leadership will be affected in such teams.

6. Model/ Framework Development
The research conducted involves examination of various dimensions of virtual teams. We studied publications and conducted discussion to reach a conclusion and researched how different aspects like communication, trust, leadership, workplace and technology affect virtual teams. Apart from going through various papers we also conducted two case studies on virtual teams.

7. Discussion
The research we conducted was aimed at reviewing publications and conducted case studies to understand the scope and challenges of virtual teams in the context of communication, trust, workplace, technology and leadership. The objective of this study was to analysis of communication on how trust exists in virtual teams which consists of people who communicate electronically across time, space and culture on a short term project without any past relationships or anticipated future. Our case studies proved this theory.

We can say that, in virtual teams, we indeed have some new challenges coming up. However, leadership is still possible and should follow a few guidelines discussed above. Virtual team should also consider power distance between the team members to have more productive team environment. As the technology and environments are undergoing drastic changes it gives new opportunity for teams to work in a virtual environment. And with this evolution in telecommunication, the virtual presence will be felt in a more realistic way which makes working in virtual teams more easier. From another point of view, these aspects should also consider national cultures concepts like Hall and Hall and Hofstede’s concepts[5]. Our research scope does not cover these concepts.

8. Conclusions
While the positives of virtual teams are loud enough there are some negatives like low individual commitment, role overload, role ambiguity, absenteeism, and social loafing. In virtual teams customers may experience lack of permanency, reliability and consistency. So it is preferred to
form virtual teams whenever required. Face-to-face teams meet at same place, same time whereas virtual are scattered and may or may not work as effectively as face-to-face teams. Virtual teams which connected through advanced telecommunication, internet and technologies do provide a solution for current downsized teams. They also address the issue of resource management where various resources can be located at any place in the world and organizations obtain expertise in various fields. And the employees obtain good work flexibility.

First case study has challenges with technology during knowledge transfer and other team had challenges with team members being geographically virtual to an unimaginable extent such that there is very less scope to schedule meetings. They proved that technology, communication and trust should go hand in hand to achieve team’s goals. Thus, to conclude, we can say that, leadership in the virtual team can be quite challenging and has some hurdles. However, there is definitely a way to overcome those hurdles. And with the help of the latest technology, leadership can and should be reinforced in the virtual team as well. Also, in the virtual team, there is a shared leadership between the team members. The figure-1 in the above page shows all the dimensions like how people from different time zones from different locations and different cultures are working together as a virtual team using email, video and webex.
9. References


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