

## The Challenge of Remote Team Working and Strategies to Make it Effective

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to describe the difficulties that remote teamwork faces and to propose strategies to make them more effective. The concept of virtual team is defined and the difficulties among its members are analyzed under three aspects: a) Gaps in the use of information and communication technologies, b) Communication, and c) Coordination. It is concluded that virtual teams present difficulties very similar to those of face-to-face teams; however, these difficulties that could be increased by the impersonal use of technologies can be overcome over time with adequate training, effective coordination and constant communication.

**Keywords:** Virtual Work Teams, Remote Work Shared, Information and Communication Technologies, Communication.

### INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world, organizations tend towards the geographic expansion of their businesses, locating themselves in those territories that allow a better use of the comparative advantages they offer and the conquest of new markets. To do this, they resort to strategic forms of business that range from the creation of subsidiaries, branches or divisions, to associations, alliances, mergers and acquisitions.

The need to develop projects and make strategic decisions in work teams should not be limited entirely by distances. Today, information and communication technologies (ICTs) make the obligation of the members of a work team to coincide in time and space disappear. E-mail, telephony, the intranet and extranet, as well as video conferencing, are valid means of establishing contacts between groups of people working for a common purpose without the need to spend time and money to make them coincide in one place at the same time.

### Components of ICT



## Source; Online

And it is that globalization and a market that demands more and more rapid responses, have led to dramatic changes in work formats (Jiménez, 2007), so that traditional ways of working have given way to the development of remote teamwork. It is no longer essential that people are in the same place to work together on the same purpose.

However, remote teamwork involves problems in terms of gaps in the use of technologies, communication and coordination among team members, thus requiring new forms of work organization to overcome these difficulties. The purpose of this article is to describe the difficulties that remote teamwork faces and to propose strategies to make them more effective.

## THE VIRTUAL WORK TEAMS

Traditionally, a work team can be defined as the group made up of two or more members in an organization who interact and work together to carry out a particular task or project. In joint work, the behavior and / or performance of one team member is influenced by the behavior and / or performance of other members (Gibson and Col, 2000; Robbins, 1999).

## Challenges of working in virtual teams



## Source; Online

Until the mid-1990s, the concept of a work team in the literature referred to individuals who carried out joint work with a certain proximity. Proof of this is that even mention was made of the conditioning of the physical space for holding team meetings. Globalization and the accelerated use of information and communication technologies in organizations have led them to develop tasks and projects through teams whose members may be located in different places, either within the same city or country, even in different countries. As stated by Corrales (2000), virtual teamwork constitutes one of the essential components of today's organizations.

Another fact that increases this trend is the complexity in the conformation of the businesses, observing an increase in strategic associations, whether they are mergers, alliances, mergers or acquisitions. Businesses expand beyond national borders to take advantage of the comparative advantages and potential offered by other markets.

It is also observed that as organizations become more horizontal, it is less and less feasible to have all the right people in the same place. If to this is added that collaboration is increasingly necessary, it is not surprising that more and more companies are turning to virtualize their innovation process.

Traditionally, companies have been characterized by a bureaucratic approach that implied that people had to be in the same place if they wanted to work together, however, as the 21st century progresses, communications and technology have allowed to configure a new model capable of satisfying the speed of demands of the environment. For this, the organization of this century forms virtual teams (Lipnack and Stamps, 2000; Corrales, 2000).

Given the distances, ICTs allow to achieve savings in time and money by taking advantage of the capacities of members of an organization or different organizations in distant geographical points. Teamwork under these conditions can be done even without the need to coincide at the same time.

According to Gothelf (2002) "A virtual team is a group of people who work interdependently, with a shared purpose, beyond the borders of space, time and organizational limits, using information and communication technologies to interact". For Corrales, 2000), virtual teams are groups with geographically and / or organizationally dispersed members that are brought together using the combination of telecommunications and information technologies to carry out organizational tasks. Under these definitions, virtual work teams have the following characteristics (Ruiz, 2002):

- Its members are physically or geographically dispersed.
- Its members can be from the same organization or from different organizations.
- They are electronically interconnected.
- They are usually functionally and / or culturally diverse.
- They interrelate horizontally.
- Meetings or work meetings can be synchronous or asynchronous in time.

According to the group of Spanish consultants Inturbrok (2002), the advantages of the new forms of work organization that these teams perceive in a more evident way seem to respond in a general way to questions related to:

- A. Increasing the possibilities of having more and better resources, both human and technical or informational.
- B. Greater operability in aspects such as communication, monitoring of work or the provision of more up-to-date information for decision-making.
- C. Saving time thanks to the possibility of planning tasks and contacts and reducing certain typical obligations derived from work in face-to-face situations.
- D. The most flexible and autonomous management of work.

For his part, Jiménez (2007) considers the following benefits of virtual teams, which are added to the previous ones:

- E. This type of team is structured by their skills and not by their location, since people can work at any time and in any place.
- F. Productivity increases, as the world work day becomes twenty-four hours and not the traditional eight hours.
- G. Organizations can significantly lower operating costs.

According to Lipnack and Stamps (2000), virtual teams are defined as such in that their exchanges take place in cyberspace, digital space or virtual space, but their existence and their work is real. However, their form of interaction has an impersonal character due to the use of technologies. In contrast, in conventional teams, face-to-face contact allows its members to have data from which they can build their perceptions, data that is not present in virtual teams. These data refer to the non-verbal variables of communication.

In practice, the most obvious example of a non-verbal variable is gestural communication; your gestures and facial expression in body language contribute to the transmission of the message, but they can also get in the way when they are not consistent with what is said or when this type of communication is overused.

Thus, the non-verbal factor can be an obstacle or a benefit depending on the case. In fact, some empirical studies show that in virtual work teams that manage to be effective because, among other things, they find a way to focus on the task that gives them meaning; Cultural differences have an irrelevant impact on interaction (Harvard Business School, 2000) and, additionally, they save time by not having to decipher highly overloaded and sometimes confusing gestural communications, which happens when this type of communication is not properly managed.

However, on the other hand, as virtual groups tend to be more task-oriented and exchange less social and emotional information, it is not surprising that their members report less satisfaction in the group interaction process than those who communicate face-to-face (Robbins, 2004).

Some authors affirm that the fact of not having a common past or future project beyond the limits of the reason for which they were created determines them. But aren't all group formations ephemeral configurations and their endless continuity is not just a group illusion at the service of cohesion? Virtual work teams probably have more points of contact than differences with traditional face-to-face teams, insofar as their reason for being is common.

Ruiz (2002) argues that leading virtual work teams implies committing to a greater proportion in the coordination of human groups than in the management of the technological variable. This is corroborated by a study carried out in Europe, specifically in Mediterranean countries, where the coordination activities of the work team cover 75% (the bulk is made up of the management of the common vital work space) and only 25% the resolution of technical problems (Inturbrok, 2002).

In fact, technology implies a problem of capabilities in its use that is solved with training, but the organization of equipment is basically a human problem. It is thus then that technology makes possible the existence of virtual work teams, but only people can make them productive, efficient and rewarding at work (Jiménez, 2007).

The biggest change of this millennium has to do with the new forms of organization. Technology represents challenges in this regard because it allows, simultaneously, greater independence in the development of remote work and greater interdependence in terms of the need to strengthen communication.

There are three aspects that technology-mediated interaction imposes on virtual teams, aspects that make them different from face-to-face or face-to-face teams:

- The reduction of the technological gap or the differences that team members may have in capacities regarding the use of ICTs.
- Communication, referring to the problem of the impersonal nature of the means used that leads to the reduction of uncertainty and to compensate for the absence of non-verbal signals in the messages. This makes it difficult to build trust, a consequence of the sui generis communication media used and which constitutes a basis for reducing conflicts and adequate coordination.
- Coordination, referring to the way in which planning, organization, execution and control of team tasks are harmonized.

## **REDUCING THE TECHNOLOGICAL GAP**

New technologies introduce a gap in the field of work. In the 90's, new leaders emerged, very young and adapted to the new information and communication technologies, not only in new businesses related to the Internet, but also in traditional businesses. But at the same time it is observed that in these leaders there is in many cases a lack of maturity and managerial experience necessary to make some crucial decisions.

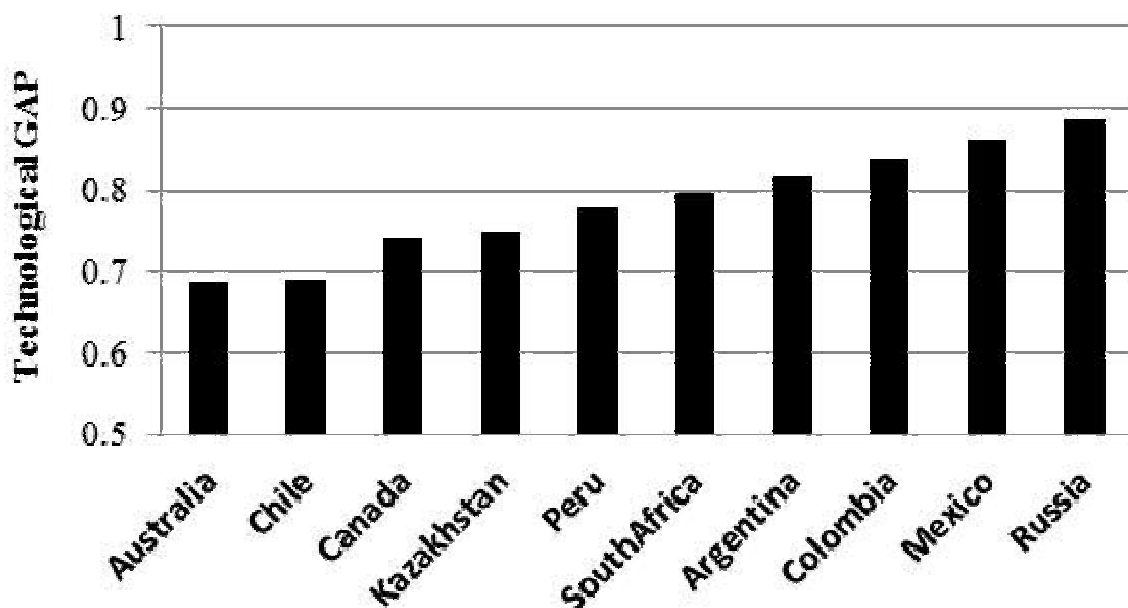
The generation gap faced companies with the following dilemma: the one with the business and management "know-how" was not technologically trained and the one with the "technological fluency" required by the new realities, did not have enough business experience and your management. This combination in itself constitutes a new reality when it comes to selecting the members of a virtual work team and defining the technologies that will be made available to it.

In many cases, it is likely that in an initial phase of constitution of a virtual work team, in addition to its integration, a period of training in the use of new technologies should be contemplated for those members who are less familiar with these tools but are valuable for their specific skills or their experience in a certain area of knowledge.

However, in some cases the process of adaptation to ICTs may result from a process of learning the use of technology during the initial period of the team, assisted by other members of the team. It could become a kind of integration / socialization stage, which allows the emergence of group roles such as the "technological facilitator". This function could be located in an intermediate space between the classic task roles and maintenance roles since, on the one hand, it would guide other participants in learning the use of the tools that will implement them for the job and, on the other, it would initiate contacts, link participants among themselves, would attend to difficulties and resistance.

The above considerations imply a new responsibility for the leader or coordinator of a virtual work team: to analyze the virtual workspaces and the available tools, taking into account the suitability of each one for each event and the technological fluency of the users. It will also be necessary to assess what proportion of private and public cyberspaces the team will require (Ruiz, 2002). Specifically, the virtual team leader must have the ability to compensate for the technological weaknesses of the team members, and adapt the tasks depending on their competencies.

**Technology Gap and Catching up in selected Economies**



Source; Online

## COMMUNICATION IN VIRTUAL WORK TEAMS

The absence of physical contact in a virtual environment can increase the uncertainty in the relationships of the team members. This is because in human relationships there is a form of non-verbal communication that reinforces the messages that are emitted: gestures, actions. Even in verbal language, there are idioms, expressions, ways of saying things that could not find meaning in an interlocutor with a different culture. It is also important to remember that people have different ways of learning through the senses, either visually, auditory or kinesthetically.

The Harvard Business School (2001) identifies three aspects of communication in which virtuality increases the stress of team members. These are: (a) Responsibility, (b) Confidence, and (c) Adaptability.





Regarding responsibility, in virtual teams there is a tendency to prevail more individual responsibility than collective responsibility, even more in the initial stages of team formation. This is due to the fact that each member of the team is clear about their mission or task to be carried out and the distance forces them to have an individualistic attitude about what is done. Only over time and with effective communication can this feeling of individuality at work be less. Effective communication can be achieved through learning to "know how to listen" despite the limitations of the media.

Team members must make their doubts or disagreements explicit to their interlocutors in some way, for example, through instant messages, email or chats, members could find a more fluid way to communicate their concerns. This is very important, since the virtual team does not escape the emergence of conflicts, and it is necessary that these are well managed so that they do not become dysfunctional or destructive and slow down progress in the fulfillment of tasks.

When members work in different locations and interact primarily by phone or computer, the more traditional forms of monitoring and control are not possible (for example, the people cannot observe the amount of effort or hear what group members say when they interact with each other). The impersonal nature of the team member relationships is studied by authors such as Durnell et al (2007) who, through a theoretical and empirical study, determined that the invisibility situation of shared work at a distance seriously affects the satisfaction and cohesion of the team members.

This invisibility in behavior can be associated with added risks such as neglecting the interests of others and not anticipating the actions of others, which can impair the development of trust (Pearn Kandola, 2006). Regarding trust, the Harvard Business School (2001) identifies three categories of trust in virtual teams:

- A. The contractual trust, that is, that which is based on previously clarifying the conditions and rules of behavior and operation of the equipment.
- B. Communicational trust, referring to the degree of discretion and honesty that members manifest in their communication.
- C. Confidence in the technical and professional skills of the team members. Communication should serve to share experiences and knowledge in order to include all members in the shared work. This look is difficult to achieve at a distance but not impossible.

Adaptability refers to the flexibility and learning capacity of team members. Adaptability is crucial for the communication of team members because it depends not only on the execution time of the project or task being carried out, but also on its quality. Adaptability should not only be seen in terms of knowledge and use of technologies but also

ease of understanding including cultural differences between members. Tolerance is an interesting element here, since it greatly supports the understanding of cultural diversity that can characterize some virtual teams.

In the difficulties of communication in virtual teams, it is necessary to build codes or metalanguages in the team's life cycle. Understanding the phrases, the ways of saying, the use of images is much easier in face-to-face communication, but not impossible in virtual communication. Despite the distance, through technology a state of camaraderie can be reached, this situation can be facilitated through the telephone and the use of webcams. Some authors recommend an initial face-to-face meeting before starting the work or project in order to create references and perceptions of the personality of the members (Gundry, 2002; Pearn Kandola, 2006).

## COORDINATION IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

In principle, it is interesting to emphasize again that, although they recognize the peculiarity of these teams, most of the authors point out that they face problems similar to those of traditional teams (Gordon, 1997; Gibson, 2000, Gothelf, 2002). The authors

Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998, cited by Gothelf, 2002), for example, list the following obstacles: Low commitment of individuals, work overload, ambiguous roles, and absenteeism. In a virtual team, these difficulties are exacerbated because in cyberspace the complexity of reality is transferred, including in the models of social relationships. Bassi (2002) affirm that one of the greatest challenges faced by virtual work teams is to achieve cohesion; faced with this concern,

It is true that the mediation of technology adds variables and modifies some aspects of the work. For this reason, Gundry (2002) points out three axes on which the coordinator of a virtual team must work:

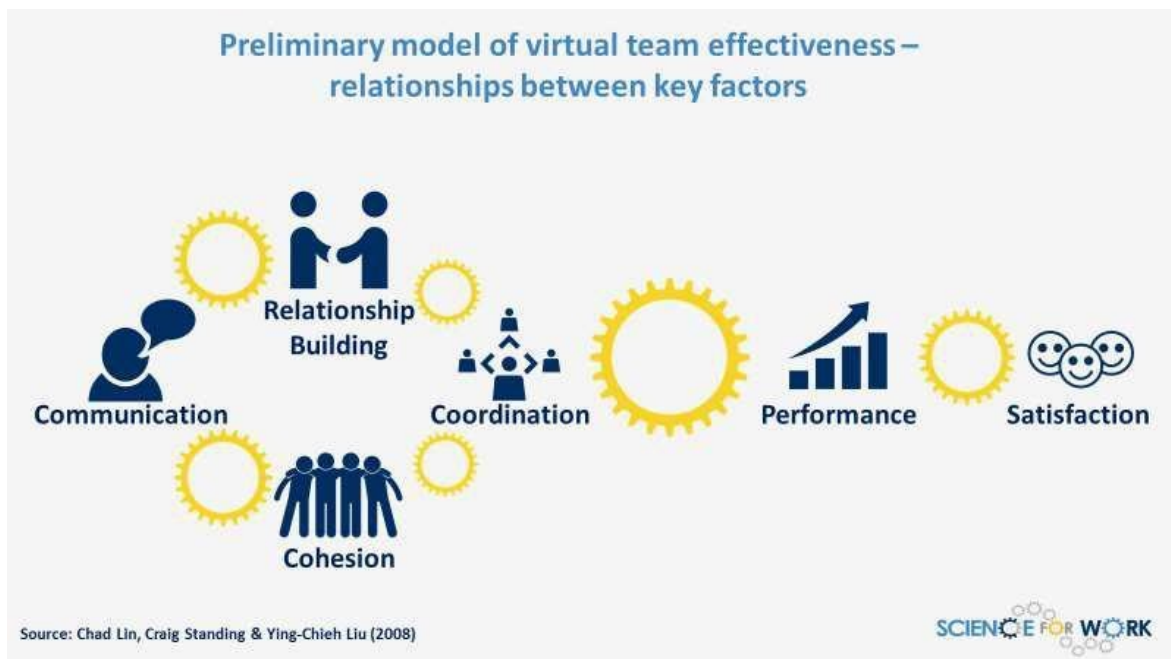
- A. Tasks: paying special attention to the design and clear communication of task plans and descriptions, since misunderstandings are more difficult to resolve remotely.
- B. Technology: To manage a virtual team it is necessary to know the available technologies and to know which is the most suitable for each case and situation. The selection of technologies will depend, in addition to technical aspects, on how much synchrony is desired in communication (Rico et al, 2006).
- C. People: The emphasis on building and maintaining interpersonal relationships is extremely important.

Based on the above, among the responsibilities of a virtual team coordinator, the following is recommended:

- Select the most appropriate means of communication and information technologies in terms of cost, flexibility and ease of use.
- Identify the training needs required for the use of technologies.
- Clearly define the responsibilities of each team member.
- Indicate guidelines on the suggested communication frequency and the need to be predictable in behaviors.
- Make sure each person has complementary personal goals and shares the team's main goal.
- Capture discomfort and dissatisfaction as early as possible.
- Address the problems of some individual participants in a one-to-one communication, avoiding copying the messages to the rest of the team.
- Take into account the profiles of individuals when selecting members of a virtual team. Invite members to make up for the lack of face-to-face contact with a message exchange that is as explicit and complete as possible at the beginning of the process.
- Ask the participants when appropriate, keys and details about the work that each person is doing, being aware that the most important thing is not the quantity of messages but their quality and relevance.

For his part, Bassi (2002) considers it important, as a basic task of the virtual team leader, to take care of keeping the original idea of the team alive, to monitor the fulfillment of roles and deadlines, as well as to encourage participation and the debate of ideas.

## Effective virtual teams



Source; Online

## CONCLUSIONS

Globalization and the development of information and communication technologies have had a high influence on the formation of work teams. On the one hand, they suppose that it is increasingly difficult to have all the participants of a team in the same physical place and that greater multidisciplinary and multifunctionality are required of them.

Virtual work teams are an appropriate modality for geographically, organizationally and even culturally dispersed participants who, however, do not stop having problems and characteristics that are typical of a face-to-face or face-to-face team. Although technology is what makes it possible to carry out this formation of teams, the main impediment that may arise in its formation is the human factor. And it is that finally those teams will succeed those teams that get their members to feel motivated, recognized and as part of a group, something that if not considered from the beginning, can be the main problem in coordinating a virtual team.

Success in the management of virtual teams comes, therefore, not only from technology but, first and foremost, from the application of different rules and modes of operation to the management of traditional teams located in the same place. One of those rules, for example, is to have a specific communication plan aimed at developing high levels of trust among members of the team, which generally demands a certain level of interaction and face-to-face knowledge before the intense work phases. Another is the introduction and acceptance of a specific regime of discipline and control different from the traditional one, focusing on the fulfillment of the planning of the tasks and the practice of effective communication.

These are all tools that must be taken into consideration if the formation and development of virtual work teams with high performance is to be achieved.

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