

The importance of the “human factor” for virtual teams

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Virtual Teams – what, exactly, is a “virtual team”?

Virtual teams, or, as they are sometimes called, “geographically dispersed teams” (GDT), are rapidly becoming the way the world does business. They consist of a group of individuals who are able to work together across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technology. Companies are now able to hire the best of the best, regardless of location. In theory, the members of these teams compliment each other and share common goals as do most any other type of team that you may think of. They are each committed to a common purpose and while working together, hold each member as well as themselves accountable for getting the job done. Virtual teams do not simply consist of individuals working from their homes (“teleworkers”), but rather they are comprised of employees working at home or in small groups in offices all over the world. With advancements in technology and the constant outsourcing that companies all over the world are implementing, virtual teams may eventually be the “norm” in the way to do business.

Why do we companies need virtual teams?

With a virtual team, one of the biggest assets an organization and the customers it services can count on is flexibility. With employees in the U.S., Western Europe, India and China all working on the same project, a company is actually getting work accomplished twenty four hours a day, not the standard eight that a more “sheltered” company would experience. They reap a benefit from being located across different time zones and this adds to their productivity. Because of advances in technology, employees in a virtual team do not have to deal with hours of travel or daily commutes to take time out of their working day. The technology that allows a virtual team to exist is in turn, is constantly being advanced and improved upon. This too drives productivity. With the globalization of virtually every industry one can think of, virtual teams and other methods of making the world of business “smaller” are the way of the future. Employees demand that their organization as well as themselves be technologically sophisticated, flexible, globally “savvy,” and highly competitive.

What do virtual teams need to make them successful?

The biggest obstacles that members of a virtual team face all relate to one core issue. By definition, virtual teams lack consistent face-to-face communication. This can negatively affect many aspects of a team’s productivity and thus an organizations ability to globalize in the worlds marketplace. In studies that have been conducted to determine the success of virtual teams, the lack of face to face communication has been found to contribute to a lack of trust among members of a team. This lack of trust leads to an overall decrease in productivity and performance of teams that have been together for more than one year in most of the organizations that participated in the study. If an organization is going to put its time, money, and resources into developing a virtual team, it’s going to want to make sure it will see consistent increases in returns, not failure after a period of time.

The “way forward” for virtual teams: the “human factor”

What it boils down to is that virtual teams are the way of the future and companies need to focus on the “human factor” of its teams members in order to ensure success. At Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC our experience strongly suggests that virtual teams need to be brought together in face-to-face interactions at least a few times a year. They also need to have access to several forms of communication to keep in touch. Chatrooms, webcams, conference calls, and specialized training in forming and keeping interpersonal relationships across long distances are all methods that a company can use to promote the success of its virtual teams.

Teams consisting of members from various cultural backgrounds not only have to manage “long distance relationships” with each other, they also have to understand cultural differences and methods to form lasting, productive relationships. It is virtually (pun intended) impossible to conduct business in an environment where one does not understand, trust, or even have the ability to speak face to face with their team members. Technology has allowed for the development of virtual teams and marketplace globalization but it is the human capital of every participating organization that will carry it into the next phase of success. In order to ensure a lasting spot in the world’s marketplace, companies will need to focus on advancing their virtual teams by providing communication tools to their members.

At Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC we believe that virtual teams benefit from consultative facilitation to enable the team to clarify roles, address interpersonal conflict issues, develop communication protocols, and devise a methodology to identify and resolve barriers to productivity.

In many cases it is not always practical – because of cost constraints - for the team to have the necessary face to face interaction. In this case, in order for the team to work strategically and for its members to work effectively with each other and with their stakeholders (clients, other teams, peers, customers), it is imperative that the leader develop innovative strategies and protocols. I use the term “innovative” because, for many leaders and companies, virtual teams present a real challenge based on the “newness” of the phenomenon and limited experience in managing them. These innovative protocols should help the team members identify their unique “team culture”, often distinct from each team member’s national culture. In order to achieve this at Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC we focus our consulting on team leader coaching and training in order to enable the leader to identify and develop the competencies and protocols he/she needs to guide the virtual team to maximum performance. We believe that the competencies which relate to “emotional intelligence” are particularly important – and often overlooked – in the management of virtual teams.

