How to Create an effective Virtual Team

The first step in creating an effective virtual team is finding the right group of individuals to perform the task. Group members need to be knowledgeable and have the necessary skills relating to the assignment of interest. It is also very important that these individuals have excellent communication skills since all work is done via conference calls and electronic technology. In terms of team size, research recommends that the optimal size for a group is 4.6 (Hackman, 2002). Realistically though, group size should depend on the size or complexity of the task. If a group were developing a new liquid-fuel rocket aircraft, a small team would be insufficient. In contrast, if a company needed to come up with a job estimate for a future project, a small team would most likely be sufficient.

In terms of group diversity, it is beneficial to have individuals from multiple disciplines serving on the team (Rothwell, 2007). By integrating various technical/educational backgrounds, each individual will bring a different style and approach to solving the task at hand. Subsequently, as more diverse solutions are offered, there is a greater likelihood of finding the most optimal solution. Similarly, diversity in personal attributes can also have a beneficial effect. If there is a task that involves creativity and judgment (i.e., there is no correct answer), then a diversity of personal backgrounds can be very effective (Jackson, 1992).

The next step in creating a successful virtual team is developing a frequent and open channel of communication. A team who rarely interacts on a personal basis will need another forum by which to gauge the progress and direction of the task. This can be accomplished by using a virtual workspace in tandem with conference calls on a continual basis. This virtual workspace will help the team understand the overall mission and goal of the project, track progress, organize previous communication and decisions, relay brief messages in between conference calls, and remind members of current and future responsibilities. This forum is also useful during conference calls because team members can reference one another to various matters within the website, thus all materials are at each members' fingertips within seconds (Majchrzak, Malhotra, Stamps, & Lipnack; 2004).

The last element of creating an effective virtual team is having good group leadership. It is the leader's job to not only bring together a competent team, as described previously, but also to create clear direction for the team, produce cohesiveness among members, and monitor progress (Hosoda, 2007). As it is with all work teams, it is important that each member understands the group's objective, but also is held accountable to clear, well-defined tasks. If not, it will be easier for an individual to get away with social loafing electronically than under normal work conditions. Likewise, in connection to expectations, feedback and equitable rewards should be given to keep individuals on task (Hackman, 1990). If not, group members will fall off task because of the virtual team work dynamics (i.e., lack of motivation, etc.), or will be pulled off task by their home office. In terms of cohesiveness, it is the group leader's job to keep communication

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alive and well. Leaders should schedule weekly conference calls with group members, and act as a moderator for all discussions. Leaders should help direct the teleconferences by setting the agenda and keeping the discussions on topic, especially regarding important issues (Majchrzak, Malhotra, Stamps, & Lipnack; 2004). Team leaders can also create a more cooperative environment by encouraging social relationships through personal meetings, prior and after the task has started. Lastly, it is important that the leader monitors progress. If progress is at a standstill or is impeded by an obstacle, it is the leader's job to find out how to resolve the problem. The leader can help allocate additional resources if needed or give task clarification to assist group productivity (Hackman, 1990).

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