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What is a Virtual Team?

- A virtual team (also known as geographically dispersed teams or GDT) is a group of individuals who work across time, space and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technology.

- Groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunications technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks.

Types of Virtual Teams:

- **Networked teams** – dispersed teams from the same or different organisations.
- **Parallel teams** – task oriented and usually short time span highly specialized members from inside/outside the organisation to deliver recommendations.
- **Project development teams** – dispersed decision making teams with members added/removed as particular expertise is required, they usually work on creating new products, information systems or processes for users/customers.
- **Work, production or functional teams** – these teams work on specific areas/tasks, e.g.: finance, training, research etc...
- **Service teams** – these teams work on providing a service and hand over to similar teams in different time zones.

Some of the Advantages and disadvantages of virtual teams:

Advantages:

- **Increased productivity** – work is not limited to the traditional 9-5 work day as a 'follow the sun approach' can be created resulting in faster time to market of products, technology and services.
- **Extended market opportunity** – An ability to establish a 'presence' with customers worldwide. This can also enable small businesses to compete on a global scale without limiting the customer base.
- **Knowledge transfer** – this enables companies to compete on a global scale by bringing together people with different types of knowledge into 'online' meetings from around the globe.

Disadvantages:

- **Communication deficiency** – a failure to properly communicate due to the elimination of body language or the increase of incorrect assumptions based upon cultural difference or lack of understanding.
- **Poor leadership and management** – the inability to communicate and deliver clear messages to the team.
- **Incompetent team members** – Lazy or individuals that lack expertise or knowledge can have a negative impact on the team.

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Tips for Creating and Working in Virtual Teams:

Create the following environment:

Climate - cohesion is far more important than co-location

Process - clearly defined roles and accountability

Focus - a shared vision understood by all team members

Flow – a virtual environment that creates and supports relationship development

Within this environment ensure the following protocols and 'rules of engagement':

Leadership:
Each team will require a leader/ facilitator.

Purpose:
Ensure that everyone is clear as to why they are in the team and what the goal or goals of the team are.

Roles:
Ensure that everyone is clear on their role within the team and what particular expertise and experience they have to offer.
Virtual teams may require some additional roles related to their communication strategy.

- Technical support

- Knowledge archivist

- Specialist in using different media

Culture:
Build an operating manual for cultural differences within the team.
Think about how the different media being used will affect the culture of the team environment:
What team culture are you creating?
What norms, styles, behaviours would help or hinder the atmosphere that you want.

Communication:
Produce a document summarising the following:

- Team members contact details

- Who has access to what communication tools

- Preferred contact methods for individuals and the group

- Rules for copying others into emails

- Email subject titles to ensure flow of communication and archiving simplicity

- Establish clear reporting channels and communication calendars

- Establish a process to encourage the sharing and storing of important information

Conversation:
Remember that conversation among team members is the most critical thing you need to support.
Use different media and keep the conversation interesting and engaging.

Feedback:
It is important to facilitate feedback about communication style, quantity, frequency, clarity etc…in the different media.

Pace:
Different team members may enter the virtual environment more or less frequently. You may need to slow down the pace to get everyone on board.

New members:
New members can stimulate a virtual team but may find it difficult to enter a fast moving discussion there needs to be strategies to make it easy for new members to find out what's going on and feel welcome and integrated into the team.

Weaving:
Weaving is a networking term that refers to a process of summarizing and synthesizing multiple responses in a virtual group.
Ideas may have to be pulled from multiple different sources and media.

Participation:
It is important to watch out for clues in data and media as it will not always be possible to watch body language and facial expression etc…

Team Building:
A virtual environment should support relationship development not simply communication.
How can we move the virtual chairs into a circle so that everyone feels involved?

It is important to remember the following:

- Teamwork is fundamentally social.

- Knowledge needs to be made explicit.

- Create ways for team members to experience membership.

- People gain knowledge from observation and participation.

- Engagement is inseparable from empowerment.

- Failure to perform is often the result of exclusion from the process.

Measure:

Put in place measurements for evaluating project progress and celebrate achievements and milestones.
Reward success to generate motivation.

If you are interested in finding out more about our virtual team training programs then contact us now for a free consultation.

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