Managing Virtual Teams

Our working habits are changing. Advances in technology mean that more and more organizations are expanding their horizons. It has never been easier for companies to operate across international borders. And many people are taking advantage of technology to work from home. As a result, there has been enormous growth in the number of organizations relying on virtual teams to get their jobs or projects done.

Instead of being based in the same office, team members work in different places, often at home, and in different time zones. They interact through a variety of online channels, such as Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Asana. And they may never even meet their co-workers face-to-face.

Read on to find out how to build and manage an effective virtual team, and some of the challenges and benefits it can bring.

1. Building a virtual team

Virtual teams often evolve rather than get planned that way. Whether you consciously decide to set up a virtual team or it has simply developed over time, it's likely to be for one or more of the following reasons:

- In response to a **crisis or emergency**, such as the coronavirus pandemic, when governments imposed restrictions on travel and social inter-action.

- To take advantage of the choice of **best skills and personnel**, irrespective of your business's physical location.

- To offer **24-hour coverage** by team members working across time zones.

- To **reduce office overheads** by having team members work from home.

- To enable **cost-effective and flexible resource** scheduling; you can scale up or down as de-mand requires.

2. Benefits of virtual working

You and your team members can benefit from greater flexibility and freedom from many of the constraints of office working. Among the benefits you may find are:

- Being valued for your skills, irrespective of your physical location.

- Saving yourself the time, inconvenience and cost of commuting.

- Working from any place you choose.

- Working at times that suit you.

- Some barriers to inclusion may be removed.

Also, you can easily bring in people who work on a part-time basis, and call on the work of experts who need only contribute for a few hours each month.

3. Challenges of managing virtual teams

On the flip side, you face the challenge of managing people you may never meet, and dealing with people from different cultures, languages, and with different personalities.

Each person has their own expectations, experience and different working styles. The team must work hard to enable each person to contribute effectively and ensure the team pulls together towards the common goal.

The single biggest challenge that virtual teams face is **communication**. Without the usual face-to-face daily exchanges between team members, you and your team members must make the extra effort to communicate effectively.

Encourage your people to stay in touch and get to know one another better. Schedule daily or weekly remote meetings and get-togethers, using the apps and channels we mentioned above.

You can also keep your people engaged and "in the loop" by experimenting with one or more of the following:

- Intranet team notice board, updated regularly with team news.

- A direct messaging app, where people can share photos and get to know each other beyond their day-to-day roles.

- Social activities, such as virtual coffee breaks or a team quiz.

- Regular team newsletter.

- Occasional face-to-face meetings where possible or appropriate.

Above all, though, your communications infrastructure must work smoothly and be convenient and easy for everyone to use.

5. Incentivizing and rewarding virtual teams

If monitoring and rewarding performance is important for successful management in a normal environment, it's fundamental to success with virtual teams.

Part of your role, as team manager, is to actively and regularly communicate direction. Ensure that team members are clear about individual and team goals, and make sure they feel supported to achieve them.

More than this, team members working virtually should also feel that they have the same opportunities for appreciation and promotion as those 'at head office.' Managers must constantly work to avoid the common bias of giving preference to people they can see.

When managed effectively, your business and your team members will be able to enjoy the successes and benefits of working in a virtual team. Done properly, there can be huge advantages to virtual teamwork!

4. Recruiting and managing a virtual team

It's not a given fact that a good team member in the conventional sense will perform equally well in a virtual environment. When **recruiting** for remote team members, look for individuals who are self-motivated, results-oriented and able to work independently. And of course, each team member must also be able to communicate effectively with management and his or her team colleagues.

To **manage a virtual team effectively**, you must learn the strengths and weaknesses of each team member. And that's all the harder without daily, face-to-face opportunities to casually monitor and mentor each person.

Working remotely, it's essential to give each team member the guidance and support they need and also build trust in each person's abilities and reliability. It's important to create the virtual equivalent of an "open door policy". Make sure team members know how and when to get what they need from you, and encourage open and frequent communications, such as regular one-on-ones.