

VIRTUAL TEAMS IN ORGANISATION

¹A. Mary Francina

¹Associate professor

¹Department of business management

¹St. Joseph's Degree & PG College, Hyderabad, India

Abstract: In the present dynamic and uncertain environment, most of the people live a virtual life. The regular calls on whatsapp, skype and live status on facebook make people connected with acquaintances. When group of individuals come together for working and accomplishing a common purpose or goal with a shared objective and connected even though they are geographically widespread are called as virtual teams. Due to the rising competition in the marketplace, devolution and globalization of work processes and advances in information and communication technologies, organizations require flexibility and agility in their delivery of products and services. Virtual teams play a significant role in order to meet these demands. As organizations continue to tussle for capable and committed workforce which is fast becoming an inadequate resource, virtual team structure provides organizations to influence the available talent across boundaries. More and more organizations are accepting and utilising virtual team approach to reduce their operating costs, support knowledge sharing among their manpower to promote culture of organizational learning and enlarge their business hours to 24/7 by benefitting on the different time zones of virtual team members. This paper focuses on the framework of virtual teams like its origin, purpose, virtual teams in practices in various organisations.

Key Words: Virtual, Virtual Teams, Information and Communication Technology, Organisation Learning

1.1 Introduction

Virtual teams consist to a group of persons who work across space, time, and organizational margins with electronic communication being the focal form of interaction. Most project teams function virtually in one form or another. This includes working from diverse time zones, different geographical locations, and firm-wide boundaries or with other third parties. A Virtual Team – also known as a Geographically Dispersed Team (GDT) – is a group of individuals who perform across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technology. They have balancing skills and are committed to a common rationale, have mutually dependent performance goals, and share an approach to work for which they hold themselves mutually accountable and responsible. Geographically dispersed teams allow organizations to hire and retain the best talent regardless of location.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To understand the origin of virtual teams
- To study the relevance of virtual teams in today's technology enabled organisations
- To Elucidate the virtual teams in practice in various organisations
- To study the impact of virtual teams on the functioning of the organisation
- To study the challenges of virtual teams

1.3 Research Methodology

This paper uses some empirical evidences and primarily secondary data is collected from text books, research and management journals, research articles and websites.

1.4 Origin of Virtual teams

According to Dictionary.com, the term 'virtual' derived its meaning from 'virtue' in early 14th century. But by the end of 1950s, it started shaping up with a new meaning of 'temporarily simulated or extended by computer software'. In recent history, a team comprised of members from more or less same culture, present at a common place and working at a uniform timing together to attain a definite goal. The rolling sale of PCs in 1960s followed by the attractiveness and passion of cellular phones in 1970s, voicemail in 1980s, and internet & World Wide Web in 1990s gradually made way for the virtual workplace and teams. In pre-historic period, the nomadic era of hunters and gatherers was the first time when man came together in small groups with a shared vision of 'survival'. Then came the agricultural civilization which led to the expansion of hierarchies in organizations. This was followed by the beginning of bureaucratic organizations of Industrial era. With the phase of Information Age, a new form of organizational structures has emerged, which is known as the network organizations. And, virtual teams are the most modern buzzword in the corporate circles of 21st century.

1.5 Understanding Virtual teams

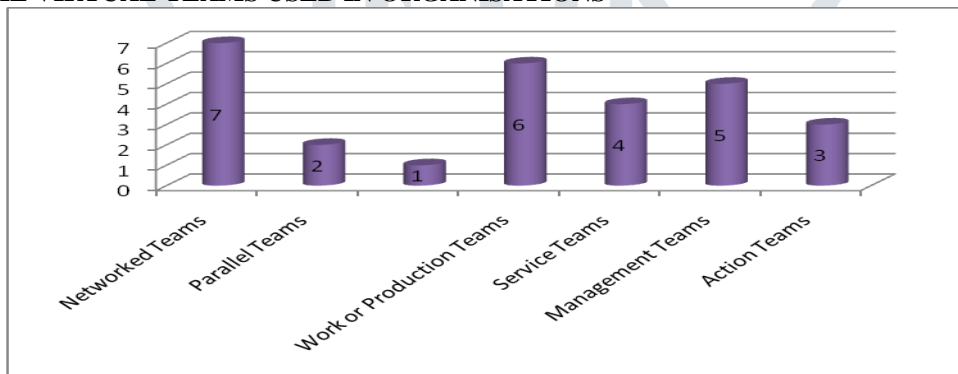
Virtual teamwork is a current topic in the literature on international organizations, it has been difficult to define what 'virtual' means across multiple institutional contexts (Chudoba et al., 2005). The concept of a "team" is described as a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Zenun et al., 2007). It is worth mentioning that virtual teams are often formed to overcome geographical or temporal separations (Cascio and Shurygailo, 2003). Virtual teams work across boundaries of time and space by utilizing modern computer driven technologies. The term "virtual team" is used to cover a wide range of activities and forms of technology-supported working (Anderson al., 2007). Virtual teams are comprised of members who are located in more than one physical location. This team trait has fostered extensive use of a variety of forms of computer-mediated communication that enable geographically dispersed members to coordinate their individual efforts and inputs (Peters and Manz, 2007).

Gassmann and Von Zedtwitz (2003b) defined “virtual team as a group of people and sub-teams who interact through interdependent tasks guided by common purpose and work across links strengthened by information, communication, and transport technologies. Another definition suggests that virtual teams, are dispersed work teams whose members are geographically dispersed and coordinate their work predominantly with electronic information and communication technologies (e-mail, video-conferencing, telephone, etc.) (Hertel et al., 2005), different authors have identified diverse. From the perspective of Leenders et al. (2003) virtual teams are groups of individuals collaborating in the execution of a specific project while geographically and often temporally distributed, possibly anywhere within (and beyond) their parent organization. Lurey and Raisinghani (2001) defined virtual teams - groups of people who work together although they are often dispersed across space, time, and/or organizational boundaries. (Powell et al., 2004), “define virtual teams as groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information technologies to accomplish one or more organization tasks”.

1.6 Types of Virtual teams

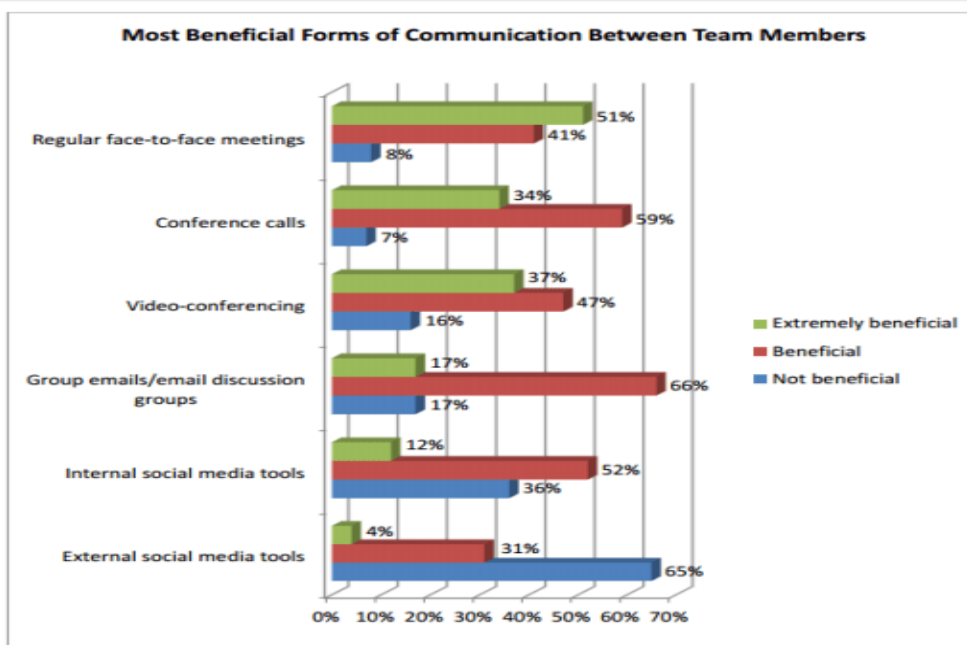
- **Networked Teams** comprises of individuals who collaborate to work towards and accomplish a common goal or purpose. Membership is commonly diffuse and fluid.
- **Parallel Teams** work in short term to build up recommendations for an improvement in a process or system; has a separate membership.
- **Project or Product-Development Teams** conduct projects for users or customers for a specified period of time. Tasks are usually non routine, and the results are specific and measurable; team has decision making right authority.
- **Work or Production Teams** perform routine, regular and ongoing work usually in one function or area; clearly defined membership.
- **Service Teams** assist and support customers or the internal organization in typically a service/technical support role around the clock.
- **Management Teams** work collectively and collaboratively on a daily basis within a functional division of a corporation.
- **Action Teams** offer immediate responses activated in (typically) urgent, critical and emergency situations.

RANKING OF THE VIRTUAL TEAMS USED IN ORGANISATIONS



SOURCE: HR ANALYSIS REPORT 2017

1.7 Rrelevance of forms of communication in virtual teams



SOURCE: TRENDS IN GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS REPORT 2017

Video conferencing and face to face meeting are extremely beneficial forms of communication in virtual teams whereas emails and social media tools are beneficial

1.8 Companies with high performing virtual teams

1.8.1 SAP

SAP has earned the title of the world's largest and biggest inter-enterprise software company. With greater than 30,000 employees in 60 countries, virtual team partnership and collaboration is critical to the company's growth and success. The company has arranged and planned itself in a strategic way, with global headquarters in Germany and large R&D units in India, China, Israel and the United States. Each center/ unit has a precise area of expertise it shares with the complete company, which reduces costs. Leaders can bring together virtual teams that contain employees from each of these specialty groups, making each team better-rounded.

SAP has also improved and enriched its virtual team performance by creating an ongoing team-building scheme with the help of an organizational development consulting company.

This initiative started with a training program in which teams worked collectively to build a community through a blend of online learning, conference calls, briefings, and coaching sessions.

1.8.2. IBM

IBM employs more than 200,000 employees from different countries and backgrounds. One of the key challenges within a global company of this size is managing time zones.

Allowing employees to work at the hours when they are really and highly most productive can enhance performance and morale. That's the reason why IBM reinvented itself to utilise a Results Oriented Work Environment (ROWE). Employees can stay where they like and want and work in virtual teams based on their own schedules. What holds the manpower together is the use of concerted software to help workforce build trust and improve communication among team members. IBM uses virtual meeting software and chat tools to facilitate more collaboration, even as team members work more unconventionally and originally during the hours that work greatest for them.

1.8.3. General Electric

GE employs more than 90,000 employees throughout the many countries in the world.

Facing the concern and challenges of communicating effectively across a global workforce, GE invested in training its leaders and workforce.

Through a virtual classroom, employees learn how to work in partnership with peers to achieve common goals with interactive e-learning and quizzes on foundational virtual teamwork concepts. Training was made highly interactive with the use of virtual breakout rooms, polls, whiteboards, management games and role-playing scenarios.

One to one feedback helped determine contributions and inefficiencies for each participant and proposed ways to upgrade the performance.

Training programs like these can transform a workforce. GE's virtual leaders get trained on cultural differences to enhance virtual leadership traits in worldwide setting.

1.9 Success of Virtual teams

RW3 Culture Wizard, the leading intercultural global business consultancy specializing in business skill development for corporate employees, released its 2017 Virtual Teams Survey Report. The Report finds that in the global workplace, more than half of the productivity of a significant portion (41%) of workers depends directly on virtual teams. 77% of workers have colleagues from other cultures on their teams, and 40% of all workers spend between almost half to all of their time working on multicultural virtual teams.

81% of survey respondents feel virtual teams produce better business results than co-located teams, but lack of face-to-face contact creates challenges that affect trust (64%), decision-making (55%), managing conflict (54%), and expressing opinions (53%).

1.10 Challenges of Virtual teams

1. Poor communication & Lack of socialisation

The major problem stated by virtual teams is communication because lack of face to face interaction and the practice is socialization is highly desolated that leads to employees being isolated and which directly impacts the innovation, effectiveness and productivity. Communication can also be hindered due to lapse in the technology. The team managers of virtual teams should move towards usage of highly enabled technology and make a norm in the virtual teams that there should atleast be interaction among the members once in a day or once in two days.

2. Lack of trust

The trust factor is quite low among people related through virtual teams due to time zone variations, non receiving of timely responses and not getting to know what others are really engaged in. Team leaders of virtual teams can avert this problem by being supportive and creating awareness of the contribution and achievements of every team member

3. Diverse multicultural teams

Virtual teams often comprises of employees belonging to various work styles, working principles, customs, practices and especially a very impactful factor is that they belong to varied cultures. Differences in culture creates a lapse in performance of the teams therefore the virtual teams should consent on some work ethics, values, systems and procedures to reduce the conflicting situations in the working of the teams.

4. Physical distance

Due to physical distance the relationship between the members of the virtual teams are aloof and cold, that acts as a fear and threat to the effectiveness and efficiency of the functioning of the teams. Together everyone achieves more should be the philosophy followed by the members and role of the leader is highly significant in this challenge as the leaders should make employees feel committed and engaged to the objectives and purpose of collaboration.

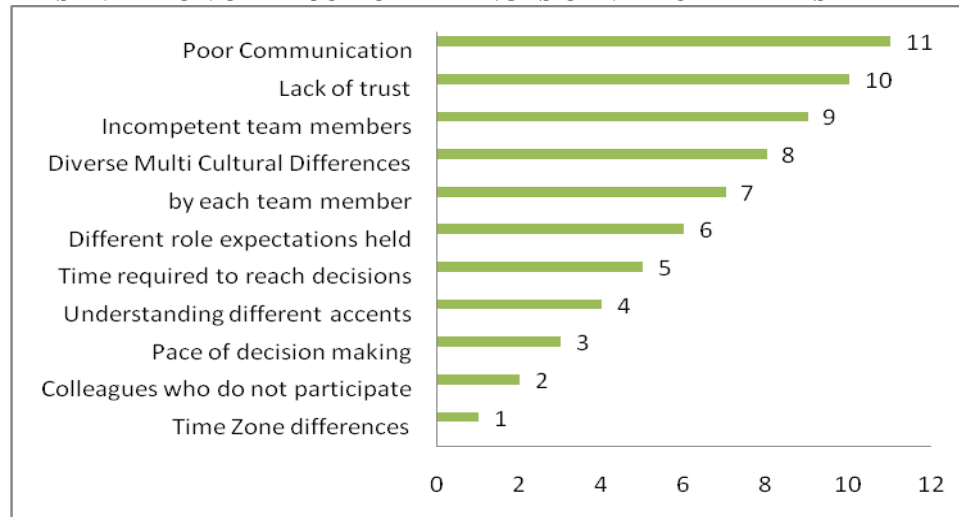
5. Time zone differences

This is a noticeable challenge of working in virtual teams, as members live in geographically dispersed locations. Therefore relying on collaboration tools to minimize the time differences between members and reduce the number of virtual meetings is an effective strategy for addressing this challenge.

6. Personal life and work-life imbalance

The related problem to time zone is that virtual teams have to work according to the timing and need of other team members who completely follow a separate time schedule. This leads to many work life imbalances as the team member has to work keeping away his personal life and responsibilities for the purpose of his assignment or project that impacts drastically the personal life of the employee.

GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF MAJOR CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL TEAMS



1.11 Conclusion

According to the social psychologists, human relationships depict their strength from the physical proximity of the individuals. Due to the reality that virtual team members have a smaller amount or, no face-to-face interactions, it gives rise to a bundle of challenges and concerns. For the achievement and success of virtual teams, it is critical to overcome the cultural differences, communication barriers, power struggles, conflict to build trust, collaboration and commitment among the individuals. Though it is difficult but can positively be achieved through effective leadership. With the right strategies, processes, training and measures in place organizations can benefit greatly from this new-age trend of virtual teams.

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