

Are virtual teams better than 'real' ones?

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Virtual teams may become the basic unit of organisations in the short to medium term. There appear to be some huge benefits:

- **Massive savings of travel time and costs.** Not only is international travel increasingly inconvenient and fraught, so is domestic travel in many places (a 2005 survey by the Institution of Civil Engineers estimated that traffic gridlock cost UK businesses £20 billion a year in lost productivity)
- **Increased organisation-wide access to talent.** People with particular skills, knowledge and experience can make judicious contributions to many more projects when they don't have to move their location.
- **A new contract between organisations and contributors.** As organisations become increasingly fluid – put together like movie crews on a project-by-project basis – freelancers and consultants can plug in and out of an endeavour easily. And because they have to act as autonomous agents, it frees the centre from many of the costs of being an employer, while encouraging individuals to be more accountable for their contributions.

There is also a spurious driver of virtual teams, which is that they are used 'because we can' – because the technology is seductive. But once the gimmick wears thin, is there any reason why a simulated meeting will be any more productive than a real one, just because it is simulated?

If the case for virtual teams is already made, and if we make allowance for the temptations of technology-for-it's-own-sake, here are four issues that become pertinent:

1. Real or virtual? It's about fitness for purpose, not just where the members are physically located today
2. Are there times when a virtual team is better even when you don't need to organise that way?
3. Is there an opportunity to re-think teams altogether?
4. How do you create high performance?

Real or virtual? It's about fitness for purpose, not just where the members are physically located today

British Airways ran an ad campaign in the early 2000s to head off competition from the internet. As it was designed to do, it struck a chord with many people involved in complex sales. It showed a British media executive in his shirt sleeves checking that a prospect in New York had received the full colour designs he had emailed across. The prospect was saying "Yes we've got it, it looks great", and the media guy was grinning at his staff and giving them a thumbs-up. Then the camera returned to Manhattan to show that as soon as the prospect put the phone down, he turned and warmly extended his hand to greet the competing team (all in immaculate suits) also British, who had flown in for a meeting in person.

Sometimes real is better, and sometimes virtual is better. It's not a matter of a single right answer. What makes the difference? The table is a quick and partial comparison of real, hybrid and pure virtual teams.

Real teams	Hybrid teams	'Pure' Virtual teams
Meet face to face on a regular basis	Core is a real team and they are regularly joined by virtual members	Rarely if ever meet face-to-face
Good for exchange of tacit knowledge	Need to keep virtual members in the loop	Technology and pure necessity tend to encourage exchange of explicit knowledge
More potential manoeuvring/relationship issues	Virtual members can feel marginalised relative to core members	May be less political/more task oriented

A key feature of virtual team communication is that it is less analogue and more digital. This has benefits and drawbacks. Analogue communication (which can take place through voice tone, facial expression, physical movement, seating positions, side conversations in breaks) are invaluable when:

- You need to build trust
- Implicit communication is an important part of team performance – real-time teams such as surgical teams, live TV editors and producers, teams controlling complex systems such as power stations, aircraft etc.

- Emotional tone is a factor that has to be taken into account: consensus building, negotiating, group creativity
- You want to give people a sense of belonging, loyalty, affiliation.

I have a friend who is a professional session singer who has contributed backing vocals to some very famous hits. She is exquisitely tuned in to voice inflections, and she knows my speech patterns. Once she phoned me and on hearing me answer (I believe I said “Hello”), she replied “You have someone with you, I’ll call you later.

Most people can’t make that kind of distinction on the phone. In circumstances where nuance and emotional tone are important, not travelling might turn out to be a false economy, and you should all really get on a plane, or physically relocate people.

Are there times when a virtual team is better even when you don’t need to organise that way?

On the other hand, here are some ways virtual team can be better, even if the people are on the same physical site.

- **Increased task-orientation.** Although they may be warm and sociable when they want to, most really effective executives waste little time with off-task communication while at work. Being able to switch off the need for social reinforcement (as opposed to task-oriented cooperation) is a differentiator of high performers. Digital communication can encourage higher productivity precisely because there is less opportunity for socialising. Virtual teams do tend to be more task oriented.
- **Better structure - >productivity-> professionalism.** Time-keeping, agendas, minutes, action points are ensured for ‘free’ by the software tools.
- **Less side-tracking.** Face-to-face meetings are often huge timewasters that go in circles and degenerate quickly into forums for political operating (this is when the potential for implicit communication becomes negative – innuendo, hints and mixed messages rely on analogue communication). In order to contribute to a virtual meeting, you have to be organised, you can’t cover a lack of preparation with waffle...
- **Creation of explicit history/audit trails.** Here, the built in tools in the technology provide great convenience for technical teams (programming, drug manufacturing, legal) where a clear, correct explicit audit trail is valuable.
- **Avoidance of groupthink.** We have known for many years about the dysfunctional group dynamics that occur when the situation is emotionally charged and interpersonal influence can bias groups away from making the wisest choices. Virtual communication may actually help to ensure a better, more rational, group process.

- **Reduced emotion in overly charged situations.** In negotiating the Camp David agreement, facilitators shuttled a document between the parties who were located separately. The focus became the document, rather than interpersonal dynamics – the implementation was low-tech, but the principle still applies.

An opportunity to re-think teams altogether

When I learned computer systems analysis in the early 1980s, the first thing I was taught was that we shouldn't just automate the existing system (that doesn't mean it's not what happens even today, however!). When you fall into that tempting trap, you perpetuate limiting assumptions about the way things should be done i.e. the way they've always been done.

One way of developing virtual teams is to use technology to make the meeting itself as real as possible. Holographic technology now exists that can enable a presenter to appear real to an audience – some was debuted recently at the MTV awards. So there will be a holographic WebEx before too long.

Such technology may prove to be excellent for negotiations, facilitated meetings and so on where it will lend the non-verbal richness of face-to-face interaction. But will it add to the coordination of team-based projects? Most real team meetings are a dreadful waste of time – why use the wonders of the internet and holography to recreate the effect in cyberspace?

However, the fast-but-not-realtime communication offered by email, text, forums chatrooms and so on affords some genuinely new ways of increasing productivity, not only through reduced travel time, but through completely new patterns of cooperation and coordination.

Forums in particular offer huge productivity gains. Not only are meetings in virtual space, they are also in virtual time. Some of the benefits:

- You don't lose time in blocks
- You can review people's contributions, and produce *considered* responses
- It's harder for people to waste time politicking and point-scoring
- You can check facts before responding, leading to increased accuracy
- You don't get forced to make expedient decisions under artificially short deadlines

A lot of the advice around working with virtual teams is about creating the shared experiences and sense of history they are perceived to lack. Actually that perceived history might not always be a good thing: a lot of 'teams' have members who hate each other, going way back. In some situations, on-line forums may actually be better for teams whose members are physically located in the same building, never mind scattered across the globe!

To learn more

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