Why Virtual Teams?

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Why Virtual Teams?

The potential of virtual teams is just as great as the potential for digital communication itself. In a few years, the world will take virtual teaming for granted. Until then, however, it's worth taking a few minutes to consider the advantages of virtual teaming as a structure for group planning, decision making, and relationship building.

What's in it for Organizations?

More efficient use of time.
The team that can stay in close touch and maintain an accurate record of its own progress is the most likely to get something done on time and under budget.

Better internal communication.
The success of any open living system, and that includes an organization, depends on clear channels for the flow of information. Virtual teams are part of the feedback loop that establishes and maintains these channels. Although non-virtual teams obviously also contribute to internal communication, the virtual team brings something extra to the table, because it stands outside the constraints of linear time, where there is access to a greater diversity of resources from many contexts and locations.

More fully informed decisions.
Virtual teams generate information. From different positions inside the organization, members within a team interact with one another and with other teams. They stay well attuned to the present condition and health of the entire system, while scanning for emergent problems and future trends. Their observations and perspectives emerge and converge. Their collective insights inform the overall organization's every decision.

"Smaller" thinking.
As teams become even more virtual, look for increasingly smaller business units and smaller project units with shorter completion timelines. Small, after all, is beautiful.

Greater "permeability."
Specialists can easily pop in and out of a virtual team.

Greater overall efficiency.
A virtual team can easily handle and track multiple projects simultaneously.

Efficient use of training dollars.
Although virtual teaming won't and shouldn't replace every face-to-face session, organizations that already have the necessary technology and skills for online communication have reported

big savings on airfare, hotel and restaurant costs, and other expenses associated with face-to-face training.

Increased Productivity.
Too often organizations rely so much on meetings that a decline in overall productivity is experienced. When team members are allowed to attend meetings from their desks the time spent walking the hallway, talking in the doorways of those along the way, and waiting for others to show up at the meeting room is greatly reduced or sometimes eliminated. And virtual teaming makes it easy to work from home a day or two a week. Many workers report their telecommuting days are far more productive than at the office because there are no interruptions from those who are wander the hallways at work.

What's in it for Virtual Team Players?

Greater autonomy.
Virtual team members get to decide when and where they will participate. The resulting liberation may actually incline them to participate more fully than they otherwise would.

Better use of individual time.
Twelve minutes into a meeting, your reason for attending may be over. Although you might learn or contribute by staying, right now you have other, more pressing duties. If the meeting were virtual and asynchronous, you could remove yourself for now, then return later to "listen in" and perhaps actively contribute.

Greater sense of connectedness.
Whether working from home, a branch office, a hotel room, an airport lounge, or even right in their own cubicle at headquarters, members of a virtual team are less inclined to feel isolated, more inclined to feel like part of something bigger than themselves.

Greater equality.
In the absence of visual cues, the organizational hierarchy doesn't completely disappear, but it does fade further into the background, allowing individuals to express their position more fully and easily.

A greater sense of accomplishment.
Because members of a virtual team are able to distribute their own resources across multiple projects at the margins of productivity, they feel more like vital contributors to the whole.

Greater accountability.
A virtual discussion leaves a "paper trail" that provides the individual members with a record of their own contributions and those of others. Although this can be a double-edged sword, the wise team player uses it not as a weapon but as a way to monitor and improve his/her own efforts.

What's in it for the Planet?

Less air pollution.
Or, at least less of an INCREASE. When team members are able to work from home, they lower their impact on air and auto traffic. This, of course, reinforces the argument for telecommuting.

A vehicle for activism.
Evidence is mounting that a critical mass of world citizens is now committed to social justice and ecological sustainability. If indeed we have crossed some kind of threshold, then our collective work on behalf of the planet is no longer about "preparing for the transition," "waking up," or "trying to get others to wake up." Most educated people now agree that the planet is in trouble. The work now is to get something done, on a huge scale. Virtual teamwork has the potential to give every person on earth a chance to participate actively in creating a more ecologically sustainable future.

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