Challenges to Managing Virtual Teams and How to Overcome Them

In theory, virtual teams give employers the chance to build a dream team without boundaries. For employees, it offers the freedom and flexibility to attain a healthy work-life balance. In practice, things aren't always so rosy.

Communication can get muddled if teams never meet face to face, trust and collaboration suffer when workers are siloed, and sometimes it's hard to tell if employees are tasked with too little— or too much.

Despite these challenges, virtual teams are here to stay. Remote work allows companies to compete in an increasingly globalized society, so the real challenge becomes adapting to the new workplace.
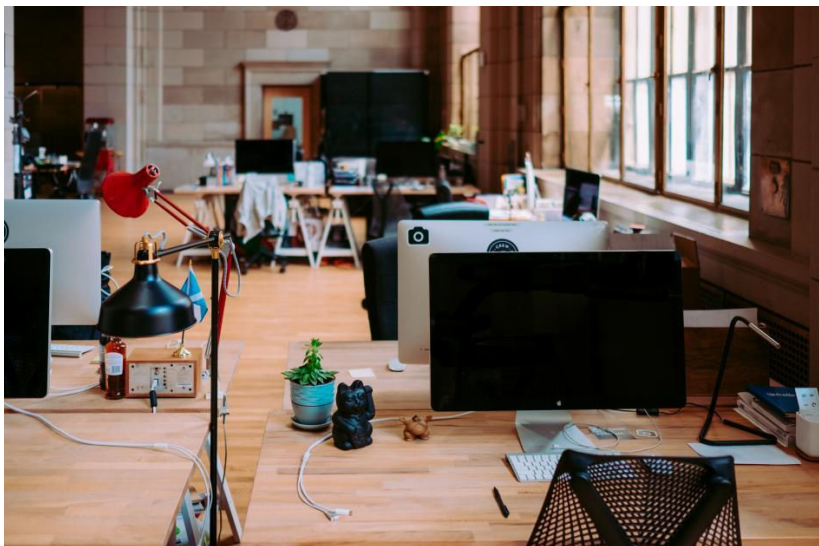
THE RISE OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Statistics show a steep increase in the number of remote workers in the United States, a trend that is only likely to continue. In 2017, for instance, more than 60 percent of companies offered ad-hoc

telecommuting benefits, according to the Society for Human Resource Management's 2017 Employee Benefits Report.

In 2019, that number increased to 69 percent, according to SHRM's 2019 Employee Benefits Report. Plus, the on-demand economy has resulted in more freelancers and contractors in the workplace. According to the latest data from Upwork, 35 percent of the US workforce engaged in at least some freelance or contract work in 2019.

And remote work has been shown to both increase productivity and lower attrition, according to research from a Stanford professor. His study showed that employees working remotely found it easier to concentrate and were less likely to take sick days or prolonged breaks. In addition, employers saved an average of $2,000 per employee each year on real estate costs.

Still, large companies like Yahoo and IBM have recently walked back their work-from-home policies. This belies the trends but underscores the problems some businesses have with remote teams.

Research published in the Harvard Business Review states that remote employees are more likely to feel alienated or disconnected when compared to onsite employees. These communication issues become a problem for leaders. If you're managing a group of employees, you also need to think about whether everyone is working toward the same goal and putting in their appropriate hours.

Rather than reverting back to the old ways of doing business, you can directly address the challenges of managing virtual teams. When you successfully identify and remedy remote workplace issues, you can build a strong, agile team that's collaborative from all corners of the globe.

"Managing a virtual team requires managers to double down on the fundamentals of good management, including establishing clear goals, running great meetings, communicating clearly, and leveraging team members' individual and collective strengths," says Julie Wilson, founder of the Institute for Future Learning and instructor at Harvard University.

Wilson co-teaches Essential Management Skills for Emerging Leaders, along with a roster of other experts.

Let's examine the top three problems leaders encounter with remote employees, and the solutions to solve them. We'll discuss issues pertaining to communication, trust, and productivity.
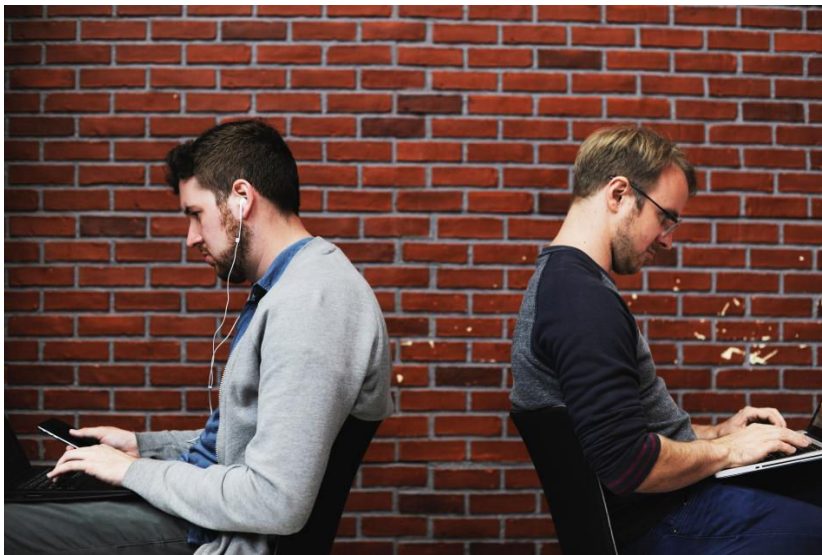
CHALLENGE 1: COMMUNICATION

Communication is key in any workplace—especially one where most interactions occur via email, chat, or calls. Ensuring a free flow of accurate information throughout your company's structure means hiring the right people, fostering a communicative culture, and using the right tools for the job.

"Close attention to relationship-building and a process to ensure good communication is really important. When the group or the organization has a strong culture that supports collaboration, this can stand in for many of the detailed steps—it really helps," said Jennifer Stine, former head of executive and professional education at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Solution: Hire the Right People

The interview process is a great way to find out how well someone communicates. Your employees' communication skills are a big factor in the success of virtual teams.

Accurately gauging communication skills in one interview is hard. So consider having several rounds of interviews via multiple mediums.

If the person will work remotely full time, it's important to see how they communicate through writing and on calls. That said, face-to-face communication can be telling. Try to arrange an in-person interview, if possible.

Also, have several hands on deck when interviewing new candidates to get a range of opinions. This also gives candidates a glimpse into your company culture, helping them determine if it's a good fit.

Solution: Foster a Culture of Communication

As a leader, it's your responsibility to foster a culture of communication throughout the organization. Lead by example by giving regular updates and holding check-ins with your team. If your staff sees that you're an effective communicator, they'll follow suit by picking up your good habits.

Be explicit about how your staff should communicate. Remove the ambiguity that so often surrounds workplace communication by providing written guidelines that outline what kind of messages should be sent through which mediums, and how team members are expected to interact with each other.

This is especially important when you have a culturally diverse staff or members who are located in different time zones. Address any language or time barriers directly. And provide tips on how to effectively communicate in spite of them. (For instance, if not everyone is a native English speaker, you might suggest that employees avoid using slang or colloquialisms.)

If possible, make a point to get the whole team together in person once or twice a year. Meeting face-to-face as a group is an ideal way to team-build. It allows remote employees the chance to get to know each other beyond their job roles.

Solution: Choose the Best Tools

Technology is what makes virtual teams possible. Don't shy away from the tools and software that can make your job easier. Below is a list of the types of tools that can facilitate communication in virtual teams, and some popular options* for you to consider:

Chat: Slack, Twist, Google Hangouts

Project management: Trello, Jira, Asana

Web and video conferencing: Google Meet, Zoom, Cisco Webex

Collaboration and prototyping: Invision, Marvel, Adobe XD

Scheduling: Calendly, Doodle

Workflow automation: Zapier, Microsoft Flow, Monday

Not every tool is going to be a good fit for your team. Consider trial periods or task someone with researching all the options to determine which suit your needs best. Provide training for your staff on the tools you select to ensure everyone is using them consistently and to the fullest benefit.

Developing communication strategies that resonate across your entire organization, including in-person and virtual teams, can be challenging. Some of our programs, such as Strategies for Effective Organizational Communication, are designed specifically to help leaders deliver clear, concise messaging to their teams.

CHALLENGE 2: TRUST

Trust is key in any relationship. When employees trust their managers and believe they're working toward a shared vision, collaboration and engagement happen naturally. But it's hard won in an environment where face-to-face interaction is a rarity. A shared mission, collaborative spirit, and strategic team building can help instill trust in remote and onsite workers alike.

Solution: Establish a Mission Statement

In a few sentences, document why your business is doing what it's doing. Ideally, this should speak to the greater good of humanity, but obviously related to your industry somehow.

Nontraditional workers (especially millennials) value mission-driven organizations because they want to feel their time is being used for something worthwhile. State your mission clearly and embed it in everything you do. Demonstrate your dedication to the cause by donating to charity, holding volunteer days or incentives, or partnering with nonprofits that share your mission..

Solution: Encourage Collaboration and Team Building

Effective collaboration helps teams bond and builds trust as people get to know one another's thought processes and working styles. When staff are able to build on each other's ideas and play to their strengths, relationships flourish.

First, it helps to have clearly defined teams. This sets the expectation that people should be working collaboratively, even from a distance. It may seem like a no-brainer, but startups and small businesses sometimes undermine collaboration by failing to form teams within the company. This can lead to confusion and low cooperation among employees. Particularly with remote workers, it's important for people to know where they belong and to whom they report.

Encourage teams to meet regularly via video conference, as these virtual face-to-face meetings can help build a sense of community and familiarity. As a manager, be sure to communicate your expectations for each team so they know they're working toward a shared goal.

Solution: Establish a Shared Goal

What is your team's overarching goal and how will it know when it has achieved it? You might have one goal, or you might have several. Regardless, it is vitally important that your team has a shared goal (or goals) and a common understanding of how progress will be measured.

These goals will likely be dictated by broader business goals, or it may be up to you and your team to establish your goals. This is a great opportunity to meet in person if at all possible, get to know each other better as colleagues, and work through a strategic planning process. If it's not possible to meet in person, this work can be facilitated via video conference.

CHALLENGE 3: PRODUCTIVITY

Low productivity is an obvious risk when employees work outside of a traditional office. In an environment without day-to-day oversight, some team members may not use their time wisely. On the other hand, certain employees risk burnout when working remotely due to a lack of boundaries.

Solution: Ensure Accountability

Without invading privacy, the best way to ensure everyone's doing their job is to set clear expectations for each role and have regular check-ins to gauge progress. It's unrealistic to expect everyone to work at the same pace, but you should have a general idea of how long tasks take and how much each person is accomplishing week by week, if not day by day.

You might also find it's necessary to have team members track their hours using a tool like Harvest or Toggl*, particularly for those who do client work, because it gives you a clear sense of billable hours spent.

Even for those who don't perform work for clients, tracking hours provides an unparalleled level of transparency. By seeing how long it takes to complete certain jobs, you are able to set baseline expectations that are useful for both current and future roles.

Solution: Form Supportive Structures

Be sure to pay attention to your best performers as much as you do the rest of your team. These may be the people at risk of overworking themselves. Without the clear boundaries that office life provides, the go-getters on your team may have workdays that never end, setting themselves up for exhaustion and resentment toward the company.

Encourage your staff to keep regular business hours and take advantage of their paid time off. Check in if you suspect someone is burning the midnight oil. Erratic or moody behavior, emails sent at odd times, and a drop in work quality are all signs that a remote worker needs to take a breather.

Conduct regular one-one-ones with each team member to not only hold them accountable for performance, but also to check in on workload and support needed.

Solution: Develop Processes

Many teams may find daily stand-ups—a.k.a. daily scrums or huddles—are essential to fostering productivity, transparency, and collaboration. Having an informal group check-in each day keeps the team on the same page and holds everyone accountable for their daily tasks and ongoing projects.

In addition to group check-ins, make it a rule for managers to set up one-to-one time with their direct reports every month or quarter. This takes the stress out of a sudden request for a meeting, and gives employees a designated time to talk about their progress or any issues they might be having at work.

DEVISING A GAME PLAN

"Managing a virtual team can be challenging, but addressing those challenges head-on is worth the effort," said Julie Wilson.

When you overcome the challenges, you'll enjoy the rewards of leading a cohesive virtual team—i.e. setting goals and reaching them; watching your team members develop and lean into their strengths; and benefiting from a healthy team dynamic that ensures the right decisions are made and implemented.

The challenges and solutions discussed in this post are complex, so approach any changes methodically and seek outside counsel if needed.

Disclaimer: Mentions of any proprietary tools or software are merely examples and do not constitute endorsements by Harvard University or any of its subsidiaries.

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