

By Tom Mochal

Most everyone works in a team environment. It has always been understood that the most effective teams are those located together. In fact, many managers decide to co-locate their team after reorganization, even though the constant churn of people moving from place to place is seen by others as unproductive.

Against this backdrop is a global phenomenon that is driving team staffing in the other direction. The Internet, faster and more reliable communication, and collaborative tools are allowing people to come together on teams that are no longer co-located. In fact, the whole concept of "globalization" is pushing work all over the world, with independent people and teams working anywhere and everywhere.

These groups are sometimes referred to as "virtual teams." They are real teams and they fit a classic definition of teams in terms of working together to achieve a common set of objectives. However, they are referred to as "virtual" mostly because they do not communicate and interact in a traditional face-to-face manner.

Here are some special techniques that can be used to manage these virtual teams.

1 Establish team objectives

The team members need to know and understand what it is that they are doing together. If they understand only their own role and their own work, they will always just be individual contributors.

2 Remind everyone they are a team

If the team members think they are all working independently, they will act independent. If they know they are part of a team working on common objectives and deliverables, they will tend to feel better about their work and be more active in their collaboration with other team members.

3 Establish ground rules

Even though the team members may be remote, they still need to exhibit a common and acceptable set of behaviors. In fact, this is probably more important for virtual teams. Ground rules include things like setting the hours during which the team members are expected to be working, establishing lunch times, determining which meetings are mandatory (in-person, Web-based, or via telephone), and defining expectations for communication turnaround times

4 Obtain the right technology

I suppose there have always been virtual teams. However, this trend has accelerated in the past few years. The technology is there to support virtual teams -- there is really no reason to be without it. This includes fast access to the Internet, audio conferencing, videocams, collaborative software, and shared directories.

5 Look for opportunities to socialize

Team members located together have opportunities to socialize throughout the day. Virtual teams don't usually have this same opportunity to interact with each other, so it is more important for the project manager to look for ways they can bond. This might include getting everyone together one time in a face-to-face setting -- perhaps for a project kickoff meeting.

6 Be sensitive to cultural differences

It's possible that your virtual team all thinks and acts the same way. However, more and more virtual teams consist of people from multiple countries and cultures. If you are the project manager on this type of team, make sure you have some appreciation for the differences in how people work and how they behave.

7 Communicate, communicate, communicate

You need to be extra proactive in your communications to make sure everyone understands what is expected. People can start to feel isolated if they do not receive regular communications. It is hard enough to keep everyone informed on a "regular" project. The communication lines on a virtual team must be opened up especially wide. As project manager, you can provide this steady stream of communication.

8 Adjust and compromise on time differences

Remember that what's convenient for you may not always be convenient to the team members. I was on a project team at a large global company where the manager insisted that team meetings start at 9:00 am. That was convenient for him but resulted in hard feeling from people in other locations who needed to stay very late for these meetings.

9 Be extra diligent in workload management

Be precise and explicit in assigning work to the virtual team members. You also need to ensure that work is completed on time.

10 Give people shorter assignments

This is not the time to give people long assignments and hope that they are completed by the deadline. Instead of assigning a six-week activity, for instance, assign the work in three two-week activities. In the former case, you won't know for sure if the work was done for six weeks. In the latter case, you can tell every two weeks if the work is on track.

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