Skills Marketplace Tool-Kit: Resources for managing and working in a virtual environment

EPA's e-Learning portal contains a wealth of books, courses and other resources to help managers and employees gain the necessary skills to work effectively in a virtual collaboration environment. This includes the following:

- **Courses:**
  - Leading High-performance Virtual Teams
  - Leading Teams: Managing Virtual Teams
- **Skill Briefs:**
  - Virtual Team Technologies
  - Virtual Team Competencies
  - Virtual Team Guidelines
  - Choosing Virtual Technologies for Your Team
  - Virtual Team Technology
- **Books:**
  - The Handbook of High Performance Virtual Teams: A Toolkit for Collaborating Across Boundaries
- **Business Exploration Series:**
  - Managing Communications in Virtual Teams

This document includes some resources that may be useful as a start.

Resource 1: Managing Virtual Teams
(Course: Managing Cross-Functions)

Characteristics of virtual teams

Today's fast-paced, knowledge-based economy has changed the way organizations work. The emergence of digital technologies has led to the possibility of creating "virtual" teams in an organization. Virtual teams rely predominately on electronic communication methods to communicate, share knowledge, and accomplish tasks in order to achieve a common goal.

Virtual teams have the following characteristics:

- members work toward a common goal – Virtual teams consist of members with expertise in various areas who integrate their knowledge and experience to achieve a common goal. Virtual team members are interdependent and share responsibility for the outcome.
- members are geographically dispersed – In virtual teams, there is physical distance between the primary work sites of some team members. The geographical dispersion between team members may be small – for example, team members may be situated in adjacent offices. Alternatively, distances may be large – for example, team members may work in different cities, states, or countries.

Motorola used virtual teams to develop breakthrough technology for Internet streaming video. A virtual team – including members from Research and Development, Manufacturing, Product Marketing, Advertising, Marketing Communications, and Public Relations Departments – was established. Team members were dispersed across ten locations in five states. Motorola used a collaborative knowledge management software product called Livelink that enabled team members to collaborate and access information, so they could work together to achieve their goal.

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Enabling conditions

Using virtual teams enables an organization to harness the best talent it has to produce innovative business solutions. This enhances the organization's competitive advantage. A virtual team is typically effective only if specific enabling conditions exist within the team and the organization. There are three enabling conditions:

- a shared understanding of the purpose of the team
- mutual trust between team members
- integration of policies, structures, and systems across all business units in an organization

Virtual teams can be effective only if there is a shared understanding of the purpose of the team. A shared understanding ensures that team members are clear about team goals, values, roles, responsibilities, and work and group processes. Team members can then attend to their own tasks without having to continuously consult with other team members. Many organizations arrange a kick-off meeting for a virtual team in which the team members outline what the team is trying to achieve, assign responsibilities, and clarify work and group processes.

Building mutual trust is a challenge for any virtual team, especially if there are cultural differences and a lack of interpersonal cues due to wide geographic dispersion. Mutual trust is built up in a team through clear communication and through team members' understanding and respect for each other's cultures.

A virtual team can be effective only when there is integration of policies, organizational structures, and systems across all business units or divisions in an organization. Differences in organizational policies may hinder communication in a team.

Improving effectiveness

Setting up and using virtual teams requires a large investment of an organization's time and money. So it's necessary that managers manage virtual teams effectively to achieve optimal results. You can improve the effectiveness of a virtual team by

- clarifying IT use and providing training – To clarify IT use, you need to determine which technologies will best enable the team to achieve its goals. The technology chosen should be appropriate, flexible, and adaptable. As a manager, you are responsible for ensuring that all team members are able to use the technology effectively. Frequently, this requires that team members receive adequate training.
- developing appropriate communication strategies – To develop appropriate strategies for communication across geographical and cultural boundaries, you need to consider issues such as available technologies, time-zone differences, cultural appropriateness, and speed of information sharing.
- managing people in teams – To manage people in a virtual team, you need to ensure that sufficient opportunities for staff development are available, and that the team is motivated. Effective strategies you can use include reward systems and appropriate conflict management strategies.
- managing organizational politics effectively – Organizational politics can determine a team's focus, resources, and priorities. Using personal and organizational sources of power effectively can help you manage organizational politics to the team's benefit.

Virtual teams are leading the way in product innovation. Virtual teams enable organizations to harness the best talent they have, regardless of the locations of staff, to provide innovative solutions. Because virtual teams rely on technology to communicate and accomplish tasks, virtual teams have greatly impacted organizational structures and work practices. To effectively manage virtual teams, managers need to focus on using the appropriate IT products and communication strategies. Effective management of the people in virtual teams and

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the use of organizational politics to help secure needed resources also increases productivity and performance in virtual teams.

Resource 2: Strategies for Building a Virtual Team Culture
(Course: Launching Successful On-site and Virtual Teams)

It is possible to create a cohesive team culture with dispersed team members. To do it, you need to build trust and promote interdependence, the cornerstones of team cohesiveness.

In virtual teams, trust is the belief that you can rely on your team members to do what they say they will do, even though you don't see them every day.

Interdependence is the degree to which team members must work with other members to complete tasks and achieve goals. As a team leader, you can build trust through promoting social interactions among team members, helping team members feel confident about their teammates' competence, and establishing codes of collaboration for the team.

You can promote interdependence by establishing cooperative goals and group tasks and focusing on tangible results as follows:

- Plan a face-to-face team launch – To develop trust in virtual teams, you should plan a face-to-face team launch. You should also encourage informal on-line chats and phone conversations among members. This will promote relationship building and foster trust.
- Encourage your team to read about their teammates – Post member resumes, work samples, and biographical information. For virtual team members to have trust in fellow team members, they must believe in one another's professional competence.
- Establish codes of collaboration – Set in motion dependable and reliable work patterns. For example, a code of collaboration might be, "A team member must answer a teammate's e-mail within 24 hours."
- Create interdependent tasks – One strategy for promoting interdependence is creating interdependent tasks, or tasks that require team members to work together. For example, ask three team members to collaborate on a client presentation.
- Focus on tangible results – A strategy for promoting interdependence is directing your team members to focus on tangible results. Give your team a deliverable, such as "Reduce client complaints by 10 percent," and then work with your team to create goals, tasks, and outcomes.

One of your greatest challenges as a virtual team leader is to build a cohesive team culture. Using these strategies will help you build a successful virtual team. A well-planned and well-executed launch can make the difference between team success and team failure. Plan for success.

Resource 3: Ensuring Virtual Team Member Inclusion
(Course: Leading High-performance Virtual Teams)

Because your virtual team members are separated from one another by time and space, some of them might be concerned that they'll be left out of the loop, isolated from information and interaction.

When you are the team leader, one of your responsibilities is to ensure that all your team members feel included. Two ways to ensure virtual team member inclusion are:

1. Maximizing interactions

One way to ensure virtual team member inclusion is to maximize interactions. In other words, make the most of every interaction you have with team members. A great way to counter feelings of isolation and to build a sense of team at the same time is to hold monthly meetings that inspire team members.

Create themed meetings; ask your customers to share the impact of your products, adopt an interview format,

or showcase employees who work to make a difference.
In short, take the time to plan regular get-togethers that are interesting, thought provoking, and interactive. Team members should leave these meetings feeling that they share a unique bond with their teammates.
To correctly apply the strategy for maximizing interactions, think of meetings as opportunities to nurture a sense of team and camaraderie among team members. In other words, meetings shouldn't always be vehicles for disseminating dry, technical information.

2. Sharing information

Another way to ensure virtual team member inclusion is to share information. Make a habit of keeping everyone on the team informed about pertinent conversations and updates, and get other team members into the habit of doing so. Ideally, you should begin applying the strategies for combating isolation at the beginning of team formation – before it becomes an issue.

Some examples of ways to share information are as follows:

- Sending all nonconfidential e-mail to the entire team – Virtual team members worry about being cut off from informal team communication – information they might learn at the water cooler if they worked in the same physical location. You can lay this fear to rest by sharing information. One way to share information on a virtual team is to always copy nonconfidential e-mail messages to everyone on the team. The key terms here are always and nonconfidential.
- Seeking input from all team members before making decisions – The third way you can keep virtual team members from feeling isolated and out of the loop is to seek input from all team members before making decisions.
- Developing and maintaining a lessons-learned database – Another good way to keep team members informed is to develop and maintain a lessons-learned database. Whoever imparts the information should be responsible for adding it to the database. This type of knowledge repository can easily be stored on the team's web site or server – some place where everyone on the team can access information quickly and easily.

It's always a good idea to solicit input from your teammates. They might bring up something you hadn't thought of. If the matter is urgent, ask everyone to join a chat room or a teleconference. If it doesn't need to be decided immediately, use a bulletin board or e-mail. If a team member sends you an e-mail message with critical but not confidential information, and she didn't copy the entire team, ask her to resend the message to everyone on the team.

The better you are at making the individuals on your virtual team feel that they're part of a collective, the more quickly their possible concerns about feeling isolated will be laid to rest.

Resource: Three Techniques for Promoting a Collaborative Culture
(Course: Leading High-performance On-site Teams)

Collaboration means to work jointly with others, especially in an intellectual endeavor. As a team leader, you can promote collaboration by encouraging team members to share expertise, information, and responsibility to work for the good of the team.
The idea of working jointly is crucial to collaboration. You should aim to promote a culture of sharing in your team, a culture in which each team member sees himself as part of a greater whole.
To promote a culture of sharing in your team, you can apply the following three simple techniques:

- Encouraging information sharing – Information sharing isn't simply a matter of making sure everyone knows what's happening. To promote collaboration, you need to encourage team members to share best practice, to talk openly about how problems have arisen, and to discuss ideas freely.

  Asking team members to share information isn't enough; you may have to draw information from reluctant individuals. Make sure that you listen to what is said, and be willing to acknowledge everyone's opinions. Just because you're the leader doesn't mean that you're right.
- Stressing team orientation – You should always emphasize the importance of the team over the individual. Encourage team members to support one another through mentoring and coaching.

  You may be tempted to focus on meeting your own deadlines instead of spending time coaching and mentoring, but you must think about what is good for the team. Your focus should always be the overall attainment of the team goals, not only achieving your own goals.
- Fostering shared ownership – In teamwork, the adage two heads are better than one is certainly true. Whenever possible, try to allocate shared responsibilities and to actively encourage individuals to relinquish total control of projects or tasks.

  Some team members may be reluctant to relinquish control for tasks, and you must deal sensitively with this issue. Avoid behaving in a dictatorial way, and be sympathetic to individual concerns. Don't imply that the loss of sole ownership is a punishment; instead, focus on the benefits for the team.

If you expect your team members to collaborate with one another, you must be prepared to work collaboratively yourself. Sometimes, it can be difficult to collaborate when you prefer to take on additional responsibilities rather than to delegate, and you may tell team members how to do things instead of listening to ideas.

Your team will not develop a high-performance, collaborative team culture overnight. You'll have to encourage team members to share information, goals, and ownership. If you can do this, you're on the road to success.

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