

## CHALLENGES OF PROJECT LEADER AND TEAMWORK IN HYBRID WORK CULTURE

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### ABSTRACT

*Dealing with human issues is the most challenging job of a project leader and work from remote makes this job even more complicated. Maintaining distance from each other, wearing masks, and communicating virtually is the new paradigm in which a project teams will have to work in post pandemic days. Team building and teamwork are key to the success of any project and require lot of human sensitiveness as everyone is different. From building a cohesive team, where individual members work in alignment with each other to attain project goal, while also maintaining their individuality and specialty, is going to be much tougher in emerging work environments. This paper presents, how work from remote impacts teamwork and team building activities and challenges that a project leader will have to face in hybrid work culture of work from office and work from remote. And suggests that if virtual work groups are well managed with good communication system, clear goals, proper technology, great interactive meetings, and leveraging team members' individual and collective strengths they will outperform teams with common office space.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid Work Culture, Leadership, Team Building, Teamwork, Telecommuting, Virtual Teams.

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### Introduction

Teamwork is defined as the collaborative effort of a group to realize a common goal or to complete a task in most efficient way. Employee teamwork allows total workforce to break down challenging projects into smaller & manageable parts and then allows the individuals to work together to complete the project more quickly & efficiently. It also allows work allocation in an effective manner, for example, by assigning the work based on the skills & capabilities of the individual. In a nutshell, teams increase the efficiency of work by improving productivity, lowering costs, increasing profits, and in variety of other ways.

In teamwork, all individuals are working towards a common vision and a shared goal. Teammates are conscious of and believe the standard of one another's work and when one member of the team need help or requires assistance, the others can help her / him in improving with their knowledge or expertise. Teams can often regulate their own performance without the necessity for management intervention. There are in general many solutions to any work or problem. A collaborative approach can cause more rapid and in-depth innovation as many solutions can come up in a short period of time after taking a project. They will quickly become familiar with one another's strengths and correct each other's mistakes if they work together. Everyone's performance will increase as a result.

Teamwork promotes strong relationships at work. When teammates work together as an effective team, a trust is built among them and they become friend. This bond of trust and friendship is good for the organization since then these employees are more likely to communicate well with each other, support and motivate each other and work in cooperation.

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With more companies doing business in remote locations and more employees telecommuting, virtual teams which consists of people working from different physical locations are becoming more common. Geographic separation can make it difficult for teammates to connect and collaborate. However, some evidence suggests that if virtual teams are well-managed, they can outperform teams with shared office space.

### **Objectives**

This paper attempts to determine how work from remote affects teamwork and team building activities and the challenges that a project leader will face in a hybrid work culture of work from office and work from remote, and how to effectively manage those challenges.

### **Methodology**

The paper will discuss impact areas qualitatively, as sufficient data for quantitative analysis in hybrid work culture shall be available only after due course of time. The discussion is based on the various publications, documents, and reports on the subject by different authorities.

### **Team Building and Teamwork**

A project requires a team where individuals work collectively and cohesively towards achieving the project goals successfully. Every team member participates with the sense of ownership, accomplishes assigned work, and feels accountable in completing the project with expected satisfaction level. Leadership and teamwork have a direct impact on an organization's ability to fulfil its objective. An ideal team is a team of qualified individuals who can work independently and with flexibility. To ensure that everyone in the team is moving in the same direction and working toward the same objective, a good leadership is inevitable. Good leadership gives the team a clear vision, a strategy for accomplishing the vision, motivates team members to use their skills, challenges the team to be innovative and improve their skills, and monitors and guides the team to stay on track.

- **Team Building**

To accomplish a big job and in minimum time, it needs to be divided into smaller tasks and distributed among selected individuals who are skilled in performing their part of the job. A job requiring multiple specialized skills can be performed more efficiently and promptly by a team rather than an individual. The challenge is to decide on the right team size, recruit right people and establish stress free communicating channels between them so that the team communicates, cooperates and is productive.

- **Teamwork**

A leader must maintain a team of motivated and satisfied members, where each member participates and contributes. Members help and support each other, while maintaining healthy competition among themselves. The leader should be able to utilize and nurture the strengths of individual members and grow them out of their weak areas. He/She should be able to understand and assign the suitable jobs to individuals as per their capability. He/She should also be able to understand, appraise, train, and develop each member of the team. So, teamwork requires frequent one-to-one as well as group interactions throughout the project life cycle.

### **New Challenges due to Work from Remote**

Virtual teams were becoming the new norm even before COVID-19 pushed enterprises all over the world to start working remotely. Everyone from small startups to multinational mega-corporations has embraced these teams, which are made up of people from various geographical regions. In a survey conducted by SurePayroll in 2013, 22% of small business owners claimed they would like to outsource talent than hire a new employee (O'Bannon, 2014). According to Gallup, the number of persons working online climbed from 39 percent to 43 percent between 2012 and 2016 (ADAM HICKMAN, 2020).

These figures have steadily risen as companies increasingly appreciate the advantages of a remote labour which include reduced overhead charges like electricity, Wi-Fi, refreshments, other utilities and rent for large offices. There are no location-based limitation and more talented people can be hired for team. If employees are spread in many time zones, companies can operate round the clock, which can in turn ensure uninterrupted productivity and can cater to all to customers around the world. Further, company can expand and grow without incurring huge expenses on bigger office space and on more equipment. Scaling up is then an easy matter of adding new members to the team. In remote working employees can work during their most effective hours. They deliver better results with greater job satisfaction, which also lead to lesser labour attrition. (Gupta, Work from Remote - An overview of Cost and Performance Implications, 2021).

### Challenges and Barriers in Virtual Teams

Remote workers can help accelerate business growth and provide better customer service, but they have their own challenges. These are:

- **Lack of Face-to-Face Supervision:** Lack of Face-to-face monitoring is the most cited concern for both managers and employees. Managers are concerned that employees will not work as hard or efficiently as they ought to, and many employees complain about lack of managerial support and communication. Employees believe that their remote managers are unable to understand their needs and, as a result, are neither supportive nor helpful in the completion of their projects.
- **Lack of Information Access:** Remote workers are frequently upset by the extra time and energy required to get information from their teammates or coworkers. Even gaining answers to very simple issues seems a like a major challenge for an employee who works from home. This tendency extends beyond task-related work to interpersonal issues that may arise between teammates who are located in different locations.
- **Poor Communication:** Any team's success is dependent on effective communication. Even so, when team members come from different time zones and haven't gotten to know each other personally, clear and efficient team communication can be hampered. Delayed responses become more common, and nonverbal communication, such as visual communication and visual cues, are lost. (Brosix, 2020).
- **Social Isolation:** One of the most common concerns about remote employment is that employees miss the informal social connection of an office setting. Extraverts are thought to be more isolated in the short term, especially if they lack opportunities to connect with others in their remote work setting. Isolation can make any employee feel less "belonging" to their company over time, and may even increase the desire to leave the company. (Brewster).
- **Distractions:** Distraction from work is an important barrier that affects performance of remote employees. This can be due to email, social media and smartphones or disturbance from children and other family members, noisy neighbours, flat mates and neighbourhoods. Many employees may not have enough space for working and may have to share space and devices at home with other people. Employees are also disturbed by time mismatches and an increase in waiting times for each other's work to be completed or for each other's availability in remote working (Gupta, Managing Distractions affecting Employees' Productivity while working from home, 2021).

### Managing Remote Team Challenges

There are 3 components to successfully managing a Hybrid Team – Leadership, Delivery Model & Technology. Let's look at these 3 components.

- **Leadership**

Leading a team physically located in a Hybrid workplace i.e., some employees at office, some remote, will require a leader to ensure the team is enabled to perform at its best.

### Building the Right Team

Hiring (or developing) the right employees to work in virtual teams dividing them into appropriately sized teams and assigning them roles appropriately is critical in managing the challenges of remote teamwork (ferrazzi, 2014).

- **Right People:** The first task of the leader is to find qualified people who can work independently and flexibly. Successful virtual team players should have high emotional intelligence, a capability to work independently, good communication skills and the resilience to get over the mess that arises inevitably. In global groups, it is also important to be aware of and sensitive to other cultures. In work from remote culture, it becomes possible to recruit persons globally, and to get better skills and sometimes cheaper options, management may like to recruit persons from different cultures and backgrounds. So, while forming the team, it may become difficult to ascertain whether the person would be able to gel into the team or not.

Secondly, the process of recruiting adequate manpower, requires interviewing people. The interviewer apart from the skill required for the job also needs to check on the attitude and personality of an individual depending upon the requirement of the job. During face-to-face interview verbal as well as

body language can be observed. Also, some practical test could be taken extempore. But when the interviews are conducted virtually, it becomes difficult to observe behavior of interviewee. Trusting interviewee is also an issue as he might be referring to some material or taking help of some other person for answering the questions.

- **Right Size:** Again, with work from remote comes the facility of part-time and contract employees, so team size required now may be different. To be more effective virtual teams should be smaller one, preferably less than 10 people. This is because team members reduce effort once they feel less accountable for output and ensuring inclusive communication in a bigger virtual team is also a challenge.

Therefore, mechanism need to be devised so that best manpower is recruited in minimum cost and team size is appropriate.

### **The Right Leadership for Effective Teamwork**

Effective managers foster trust and relation amongst teammates, clarify goals and guidelines, eliminate multitasking during team calls, encourage constructive communication and install right technology.

- **Building Relationships and Fostering Trust Amongst Teammates:** Fostering trust and building relationship are the essential foundation for an effective teamwork. Face-to-face communication is better than virtual as coworkers/teammates who work in the same office frequently talk about their lives, but virtual teammates rarely do so. Leaders should urge team members to outline their backgrounds, the value they want to add to the group, and how they prefer to work in virtual teams. This enables coworkers to develop mental images of one another when communicating later via e-mail, phone, or text messaging. Building relationships should be a continuous process. To overcome the isolation that might emerge when employees do not physically work together, manager should allow each employee a few minutes at the start of conference calls to share his/her recent professional success or personal news. (Bakken, 2018).
- **Setting of Clear Goals and Guidelines:** Coordination within virtual teams is a challenge because people are working remotely from different places. Leaders must bring their team's goals, roles, and duties into alignment. It is critical to acknowledge the importance of developing a common purpose or vision in virtual teams, as well as framing the job in terms of individual team members' needs and objectives. Work should be simplified and assigned to different small subgroups. They should be explained clearly not only their goals and roles but also about their task and work process, providing specifics on who is responsible for what and when. Leaders should examine how things are going on a regular basis and make any necessary adjustments or training.

### **Delivery Models**

Setting an optimized delivery model is essential for gaining the best productivity out of the team. This will involve setting up cadences – like a 15-min scrum call at a time common to all time zones, means of remote status reporting, means of how handover or handshake will happen between team members and mode of communication. This will also include Team building or Fun activities to bring the team together socially like games over the internet, or online coffee conversations etc. Constructive communication is a critical element of the delivery model.

- **Constructive Communication:** Teamwork requires constructive communication within team members and team leader must ensure this. Maintaining distance and virtual meetings take away lot of associated acts of communication, like body language, face expression etc. posing a need to device different mechanisms that can fill these gaps. Employees generally do other things during team calls, such as surfing the web or going to the bathroom. Virtual collaboration necessitates that everyone be mentally present and engaged and multitasking on calls should not be permitted. In virtual meetings, teammates should be invited to share their thoughts on a regular basis and should be encouraged to switch on the video, which eliminates the chance of multitasking entirely. A charter must be prepared that describes virtual meeting participants' expectations, such as limiting background noise and side dialogues, speaking clearly and at a moderate pace, listening attentively and not dominating the conversation, and so on. The charter should also specify when to use specific communication modes in specific scenarios, such as whether to answer via email versus calling versus generating and sharing a document.

Leaders' one-on-one performance management and coaching interactions with their team members are important to the success of any team. These contacts should be a regular part of the virtual team's routine, not only to keep members connected to the vision and highlight their role in overall teamwork, but also to check status and provide feedback.

Virtual teammates should also meet in person on a regular basis for proper communication. This is especially helpful when a project starts, when a new person joins the team and when milestones or important issues arise.

### Technology

- **The Right Technology:** Virtual teaming has become easier because of the advancements in collaboration technologies such as shared workspaces and multi-point video conferencing. Choosing the right technologies does not always imply choosing the most recent or feature-rich. The organization must install rather simple systems for direct calls, conference calls, text messages, and participation in virtual team rooms and discussion forums to boost productivity. It's critical not to sacrifice reliability, Data security is equally important and hence the right tool choice is important. In addition to virtual collaboration tools, the team will also require the right hardware & software to perform. For example, many companies are providing for Capex costs for basic infrastructure like chair / table / devices etc and Opex costs like broadband, phone calls etc. It also calls for software tools to do sessions together like Mural or Trello where team members can come together and work jointly on ideation / planning etc.

### Conclusion

Hybrid teams, which include both remote workers and those who are physically present in the workplace, can assist businesses in lowering costs, lowering attrition, increasing productivity, and becoming more agile in the face of adversity. This new system, however, brings with it a new set of challenges for managers who have been trained within the confines of the traditional workplace. Dispersed teammates find it difficult to communicate and collaborate due to geographical distance. However, if virtual work groups are properly managed, with good communication system, clear goals, proper technology, great interactive meetings, and leveraging team members' individual and collective strengths they will outperform teams with common office space.

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