

How to Enjoy Working in Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

In the pharmaceutical industry, programmers are used to working in teams. Increasing globalization means we are now assigned more often to "virtual teams", where teams are split across geographic regions, time zones and organizations. Specific challenges need to be addressed to ensure effective functioning of virtual teams.

We will share our experiences working in virtual teams for several years as members and leaders. During this time we learnt to deal with the challenges that arose due to members not meeting each other in person and being dependent on technical equipment for communication. We conclude that it is possible to build strong relationships and coordinate work flow in virtual teams so that team members mutually achieve desired goals without feeling lost.

INTRODUCTION

When the Authors met in their first jobs in clinical research, more than 25 years ago, the study teams consisted of clinical scientists, data managers, statisticians, programmers and safety specialists, all sitting in one building. We knew each other, spent our breaks together, and had fixed working hours.

Nowadays most teams consist of people working in different physical locations, often split over continents, and sometimes even companies (e.g. sponsors, data vendors, CROs). These factors result in significant time zone and cultural differences. Such teams are called virtual, distributed, or remote teams.

Working in virtual teams implies additional challenges compared to working in co-located teams. To be successful it is necessary to take these special conditions adequately into account.

In our paper we will concentrate on the situation and challenges of individuals. The specific advantages and disadvantages from a company's position will be omitted.

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Some challenges are specific to virtual teams or occur more frequently or more prominently in virtual teams. We have categorized these in three blocks: Communication, Relationships, Team Leadership.

COMMUNICATION

Virtual teams do not have the advantage of direct personal talks – people are spread all over the world. This involves

- different native languages or accents
- lack of non-verbal communication in meetings
- different cultural background
- dependency on technical devices and tools to facilitate communication
- different time zones

The team members usually speak various native languages. For the interaction with the other members they often have to change to a common language – mostly English. The different accents and levels of familiarity might provoke misunderstandings. On the other hand it can also lead to feelings of insecurity. When you are not familiar with a language you might be afraid that you cannot express your opinion clear enough or you might take longer to formulate an answer, which can cause a feeling of disadvantage compared to team members who are more fluent. A bad telephone line can additionally increase the existing language barriers.

Online communication reduces reception to what you hear and what you might see on a screen. How do you interpret a pause after you have asked a question? In conventional meetings we watch the facial expressions and body language of our listeners to decide if we can go on or need to provide more details. On the other hand you might go on talking without really knowing if the team colleagues on the line are still engaged because you do not get any reaction.

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Usually cultural differences are more prominent than in co-located teams. Often there is minimal awareness of these differences. While my comment might seem harmless in my culture it can hurt the feelings of my colleagues from a different cultural background. While, for example, Germans would say “No, I think this does not work” many other cultures would never express it in such a direct way. These differences as well as those in individual personality characteristics (for example, quiet versus talkative members) can result in demanding challenges in a distributed setting.

The most striking topic in working with people who are in another location is to overcome the distance for exchanging information. The communication between most members is completely depending on technical devices and tools. Hence technical issues can have a huge impact.

The decision about which communication channel to use may not be straightforward. If I ring the person I might wake him or her up because it is night time for them. If I mail I might not get an answer in time. These considerations are getting even more complex when we want to discuss issues with the whole team. Is it possible to have all members available at the same time? When is the best time slot and how does it impact each individual? For people in Central Europe this implies direct contact to colleagues from Asia usually only happens during the mornings and with those from America only in the afternoons. If the team consists of members from all three locations this might mean that the colleague from California dials into a meeting at 6am while it is 3pm in Switzerland and already 9pm in Shanghai.

RELATIONSHIP

In virtual teams a close personal relationship between team members or between leader and members usually needs to be initiated actively. The possibility of informal talks and ways how to better get to know each other is limited. People do not know each other very well and are hesitant in revealing too much during the official meetings. They might feel isolated or left on their own. Conflicts might be hidden and difficult to detect. If they are known a way has to be found to talk about them openly and to manage them adequately.

TEAM LEADERSHIP

Virtual teams present special challenges for the leader. The leader of a project team usually is not the functional manager of a team member. It is much more difficult to get an idea of the workload distribution or the level of motivation of each team member. Most members belong to several teams – often local and other distributed teams. Due to the lack of face-to-face communication it is also not easy for a team lead to get an idea if everybody is clear about their tasks.

HANDLING OF CHALLENGES

When listing all these special challenges it is surprising that many distributed teams reach their goals. What helps them to overcome all these difficulties and cooperate successfully? In the next paragraphs we will describe approaches that proved helpful for our work in and with virtual teams.

COMMUNICATION

It is very important to speak slowly and clearly, using simple language. It is also very helpful to repeat important messages in different words. When you are not sure if you understood your colleague correctly, paraphrase what he said and ask for confirmation. Listen carefully to questions and reactions which might reveal a wrong perception. Fun is great, but be careful with jokes with respect to understandability and different cultural background.

A possibility to get used to specific accents is listening to speakers from different countries on internet. Also one-to-one phone calls are helpful for a general improvement of listening skills.

Due to the lack of informal information and partly limited perceptions many topics need to be made explicit. We usually watch the facial expressions from others to decide if we can proceed with our explanations or if we need to give further details. As we do not have these hints we have to explicitly ask. Even simple questions can lead to confusion. Can no answer be interpreted as agreement? No feedback at all usually makes many people insecure. Therefore it is helpful to add some short remarks like “I agree”, “interesting”, “hm” or ask questions.

It should be clarified and agreed upon which communication channels are preferred in which cases, e.g. when to use email, when to use phone calls or informal chats. Also the frequency and style of formal meetings should be defined at the beginning and communicated to everybody.

The choice of tools is very important for a successful outcome of a contact It has to be decided between:

- One-to-one phone calls (e.g. clarifying complicated issues quickly)
- Instant Messaging Tool (e.g. quick and easy questions)

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- Telephone conferences (e.g. regular meetings)
- Video conferences (e.g. Kick-off meetings)
- Email (e.g. for summaries of discussions, sharing links, announcements, alternative if time difference does not allow synchronous communication)
- Communication Forum (e.g. discussions of specific topics)

RELATIONSHIP

In almost any company you find a common room like a coffee kitchen. This gives employees the chance to meet their colleagues informally and to exchange some small talk. Often this is considered a minor matter, but it helps to get to know your colleague as a person and to build trust.

As this does not exist for virtual teams it is very important to foster the exchange of networking opportunities. The best way is starting with a face-to-face kick-off meeting. If not possible, use the first virtual meeting to have the opportunity to get to know each other. Ask the members to prepare something for the meeting to introduce themselves. Give everybody the chance to ask questions and let all of them exchange their interests. We consider it as essential to make everybody say something during the first meeting. Afterwards it is much easier to contribute to project discussions. How do you want to discuss difficulties or even conflicts if people do not dare to speak up in a relaxed situation?

Genuine trust is developed over time but in a virtual project team you should act on the assumption that every member wants to deliver good work to reach the goal. Therefore all might benefit from a higher level of trust right from the beginning.

There should be a desire by everyone to take any occasion to meet individual team members in person or to have one-to-one phone calls.

TEAM LEADERSHIP

Many of the challenges described in the previous section need to be handled by the team leader. Virtual teams require more rules and organizational structure than co-located teams. Time for these organizational tasks must be planned in at the beginning to save time in later phases.

Setting of goals

Before really starting all people working on the project need to have a clear picture of the goal and the timelines/milestones and how each member will contribute to the work. Members' roles and responsibilities must be clear.

Work load evaluation

A virtual team lead most probably is not the functional manager of the individual members and must adopt a leadership style based upon influence and agreement. This is in itself not easy. To get an idea of the workload of each member a "health check" can be included in the regular meetings. Every person on the team feeds back the current stress level and any upcoming work not related to this project to allow better planning and avoid unforeseen resource bottlenecks. Alternatively regular one-to-one or sub-team meetings can be held.

Conducting meetings

As mentioned before, ideally one of the first meetings is a face to face Kick-off meeting. It helps tremendously for the team phases to follow.

Obviously the special setting makes much more planning and organizing for any meeting necessary than traditionally needed. There are hardly any ad-hoc meetings. So it is worth investing in a good preparation. Every meeting should have a clear agenda, ideally with estimated lengths for each topic as the timetable usually is more stringent. Some systems even kick out the users at the end of the booked time.

Minutes should be written in turns for each meeting. This increases the sense of responsibility of each team member. Ensure to include summaries of discussions, decisions and assignment of action items.

For teams working in different time zones, Time Zone Planners on the internet proved very helpful. If there is no suitable time for all members you can still discuss if a rotating time slot would be acceptable. Then it is not always the same individual having to work painful times. Additionally, key meetings can be recorded and made available for everybody. A calendar with absences (business or private) and bank holidays should be established accessible for everyone. With this information you can take advantages from team members being on business trips to other time zones.

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Due to the lack of non-verbal communication in virtual teams more chairing is needed, e.g. find a way to kindly stop people who are talking too much and to encourage quiet people to share their opinion. Signs of boredom like yawning, rolling eyes, or of people not getting a chance to say something are invisible and the leader has to gain a fine sense of these situations.

Be aware of the time restrictions and make sure your technical equipment works a few minutes before a meeting starts.

Documentation

Clear processes and a good documentation available for all team members are fundamental for each project. Use a central place, accessible for everybody, where all important information will be stored. Taking away the possibility to ask someone sitting next desk makes it even more evident. For us it proved very helpful to set up a project Wiki where all important information is stored with links to the primary locations. Other possibilities would be a shared document folder (e.g. Sharepoint, Livelink, Windows File Explorer) or a social platform. Everybody has to feel responsible to provide information to this central place.

Coaching

Sometimes the team leader has to take on the role of a coach.

Usually the teams are formed of different specialists. It is the leader's task to make clear why each member is on the team emphasizing the specific strengths. This helps to avoid competitive thinking within the team and to appreciate each person's skills. Show that you care for each member's input and that you value their views and opinion.

Sometimes finding the right balance so that it pleases all team members is just not possible. New or young members might need more coaching to be included properly, while on the other hand experienced virtual team members may perceive too much time spent on team building as inappropriate and wasteful. This might include personal phone calls or chats with single members to help them finding their role within the team and to successfully contribute to the goal.

Conflicts cannot always be avoided. Quite often they come up from simple misunderstandings which can be easily resolved before they escalate. Phone calls with individuals are the best way to find out what they are struggling with and then try to mediate between the parties. Talking about conflicts in a constructive way usually strengthens the team spirit.

CONCLUSION

Virtual global teams are part of our current and future working environment and cannot be avoided. Team members are usually selected according to their expertise and availability and often not according to their soft skills. Therefore it is important that we all learn how to deal with the special challenges of this setting. So, in the end social competence and cultural empathy are essential for the whole team.

A virtual team needs more leadership support. Taking all these special challenges adequately into account and actively addressing them makes the team successful. It is easier to actively contribute to the team goal if you feel comfortable and respected.

Our experience showed that people not just accept the challenges, but really enjoy working in virtual teams. At the end they experience working with individuals from so many different backgrounds not as a challenge, but recognize it as a great benefit.

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