

Virtual Teams – Information Flow

Virtual teams use communication and information technologies to overcome the challenge of time and distance. These technologies include company intranets, team conference calls, e-mail, instant messaging, video conferencing, and various web-based applications. Organizations dedicate significant time and resources to determining how information should be communicated. However, it is equally important to focus on what is communicated and when.

One method of keeping virtual team members informed is through the use of different technologies such as videoconferencing equipment, collaboration software, phone, and email. By establishing a structured system of regular conference calls and frequent email communication, teams can stay updated on ongoing work and emerging issues. It is crucial to create and consistently utilize this system to ensure effective communication.

A crucial function of virtual teams is to share information promptly. The quality of both formal and informal communication is what keeps virtual teams engaged and committed.

Many individuals in virtual teams may not be adequately prepared for the high communication demands of this particular work environment. It is important to consider certain issues in order to enhance communication in a virtual setting.

1. Personalize it

To help team members get to know each other, provide opportunities for them to interact. If possible, organize a physical meeting. Starting a virtual team with a face-to-face meeting might seem contradictory, but it helps people communicate more easily afterwards. If a physical meeting is not possible, web or video conferencing can be used, although it may take longer to establish familiarity. Including ice-breakers and team-building exercises in regular meetings is also beneficial.

2. Show sensitivity

In virtual conversations, the lack of body language and tone of voice can lead to miscommunication and potential misunderstandings, as the true intention behind a message can be masked, potentially causing one to come across as rude or insensitive if caution is not exercised.

It is beneficial to discuss communication issues with your team and provide feedback if a colleague slips into a certain mode, without causing offense.

Reflecting on past experiences, consider ways in which you could modify your approach when sending emails or instant messages, ultimately enhancing your overall electronic communication.

3. Honor diversity

It is important to consider the time zones and holidays of your team members, as they may vary across different regions. For instance, Labor Day is observed on different dates in different countries, such as the first Monday of September in North America and the first day of May in many other countries.

- Discuss the physical and cultural variations that affect collaboration.
- Utilize time-zone calendars to determine optimal meeting times throughout the day.
- Consider alternating meeting times to ensure fairness and avoid expecting someone to consistently work outside of their regular hours.

What communication barriers have you experienced due to time zone or cultural differences, and how have you resolved them?

What actions can you take to bridge the cultural distance between your virtual teammates immediately?

4. Use Time Wisely

Take the time to develop strategies to enhance communication within your virtual team.

To maximize efficiency and productivity during meetings, it is recommended to distribute a preliminary outline of the topic to be discussed. Afterwards, incorporate the input and data gathered from the meeting to synthesize the information and redistribute it to ensure all participants receive a copy.

By implementing a structured process, all participants can contribute their input effectively and have ample time to make meaningful contributions to the meeting and the team. Our article on [Running Teleconferences](#) offers guidelines for running productive phone/conference meetings.

How is communication currently organized within formal meetings?

What changes are proposed to be introduced to improve efficiency and productivity in these meetings?

KEY LEARNING POINTS

The distributed nature of virtual teams presents challenges for their members and leaders, including time zone differences, local pressures, cultural differences, and a lack of face-to-face contact. Technology has advanced to assist with these challenges, but the effectiveness of virtual teams ultimately depends on how people interact rather than solely relying on technology.

Technology changes, but human nature remains consistent. Virtual teams require the same level of discussion and exchange as traditional teams. When done well, virtual teamwork allows team members to contribute from anywhere at any time, reducing the need for in-person meetings. This is why it's important to maximize the effectiveness of virtual work teams in your organization.