

Strategies for Managing a Virtual Workforce

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Abstract: In today's fast-paced, ever-changing organizational environment, there is a heightened need for versatility and productivity in every situation. With the advance in technology and changing customer needs, an organization can find itself left behind the competition if it does not work smarter and faster than others in the marketplace. To keep up with these demands, many organizations have had to do away with the concept of traditional, on-site, office environments for those of virtual configuration, especially now during this COVID-19 pandemic as this allows companies to operate with lower overhead costs, capitalize on geographically dispersed talent and provide flexibility in the services they offer. This has since been a challenge to managers as they cannot have face-to-face interactions and have had to come up with new management styles to make sure the virtual workforce is performing and producing as per organisational standards.

Keywords: COVID-19, Managing, Strategies, Virtual workforce

1. Introduction

According to Skyrme (2000) a virtual organisation is one "where the physical office is replaced by office services". Keeling (2000), on the other hand, says: "A new form of organisation is evolving that uses information technologies to collapse time and space." They also mention that 'virtual workers are people that work at home or away from the workplace and have their own computers and data communication devices". A virtual organisation is therefore a place where people work by using computer networks to work cooperatively and share knowledge quickly and easily regardless of time, distance and organisational boundaries.

In a traditional office, managers need to administer and coordinate efforts to achieve the goals of the organisation (Keeling, 2000). If managers want to attain the organisational objectives, they need to combine human resources, material resources and financial resources into a productive system (Keeling, 2000). However, the manager of the virtual workforce needs to "find new ways of working with people at arm's length" (Brevis & Vrba, 2013). New organisational structures need to be implemented and managers need to learn more about the virtual workforce. With technology such as e-mail, e-commerce, Internet, cell phones, etc. the time is finally right for virtual offices to take shape. Computer networks make it possible for a person to work outside the confined walls of the

traditional office. They will be working from a virtual office – a portable office that allows people to be functional and effective wherever they are, be it in the car, at home, in a hotel lobby or at a client's office. It is therefore important for companies to start spending money on computer networks and other technologies rather than on buildings (Brevis & Vrba, 2013). A virtual workforce constitutes employees that operate remotely from each other and from managers. Therefore, managing this emerging workforce successfully depends largely on effective communication between managers and the employees that constitute the virtual workforce (Ejiwale, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to identify and evaluate a variety of leadership skills and techniques related to managing in a virtual workforce to assist managers improve the effectiveness of their virtual workforce to increase performance, and ultimately, positively impact business results. Traditional jobs have been office-based, with close supervision. In the virtual office managers are challenged with managing the workforce because they do not know how to manage virtual workers off-site, workers that they cannot see. The challenge is to establish methods for effectively managing the performance of virtual team members to ensure they are held accountable for their actions despite the absence of an on-site manager or supervisor. They feel that managing virtual workers off-site places a huge burden on them. The biggest difference is the shift in management style from direct control to management of results. The biggest challenge for

most organisations in managing the virtual workforce is determining how managers can manage the virtual workforce, how managers can improve communication with the virtual workforce and how managers can control the virtual workforce.

2. Background

During the last decades all administrative activities were centred in the traditional office where the administration function was performed. Employees worked at their own physical workplace with furniture and equipment provided by their employer. They had to do filing, receive visitors, take telephone calls, type documents, make photocopies, etc. The list is endless. The virtual organisation emerged from the rapid developments in information technology (Suazo, 2006). This is also supported by Hoffman (1999), who says "A new administrative scenario – the virtual office emerged in enterprises due to the influence of technological development, which drastically changed the traditional office scenario". The meaning of the word "office" as we understand it today will have a completely different meaning in the future. Organisations will have to adapt to their new environment where Information Technology will play a major role in communication within the organisation.

According to Brevis and Vrba (2003), "modern managers need to appreciate and understand the power of technology and must be able to use it to the best interest of the organisations they work for, pp 50". Virtual teams allow companies to operate with lower overhead costs, capitalise on geographically dispersed talent and provide flexibility in the services they offer. One source estimates that 20 percent of the world's workforce will be working virtually by 2005 (Burtha, 2004) and The Gartner Group had estimated that by 2008, 41 million employees will be working virtually at least one day per week, and nearly 100 million will do so at least one day per month (Consultants, 2005). In the coming decades, most people will be working in virtual teams for at least some part of their jobs (Suazo, 2006). Human beings have always functioned in face-to-face group settings. While the use of teams is on the rise, the face-to-face aspect of normal working relationships is changing dramatically. Electronic communication and digital technologies give people a historically unprecedented ability to work together at a distance, resulting in a powerful trend to team across organizational boundaries (Lipnack, 1997).

3. Literature Review

The virtual workforce does the same job in nearly the same way, and working full-time or part-time from any place, be it at home, in a car, in a hotel lobby, etc. The virtual workforce is not one that be confined to the walls of a traditional office. The virtual force will remain as employees and will have all the same terms of employment as the traditional worker. Virtual workers do not fit in with traditional organisational paradigms. Virtual workers are usually self-initiated and self-directed and although they cannot always be controlled, they need to be supported from the top (Van Der Merwe, 2007).

Technology brought positive changes to organisations but also changed the position of the manager. Traditionally the worksite was located close to a source of skilled labour and employees were near their direct heads. Managers could observe the work being done by employees and could easily communicate with employees face-to-face. With the emergence of the new organisation virtual office employees do not work in the confined space of the office but at a remote site by using a computer linked to the central office (Robbins, 2001). The traditional face-to-face management in the virtual has been removed and therefore the need for managers to "control" the work of employees needs to be changed. Managers and executives usually fear that they will not know if the virtual workers are working if they cannot watch over them while they are at work. The simple rule is that remote management is not much different from managing people on-site (Montero, 2004). It involves basic management skills that include setting goals, assessing progress, giving regular feedback, and managing by results.

One cannot be sure that employees are really working every minute you see them in the office either. Managers can easily confuse activities with accomplishments (Montero, 2004). Managers can feel that those who worked reduced hours, even if they worked efficiently, would not be promoted because they were not sufficiently committed. The long hour's culture in many organisations makes full-time work difficult to define. Virtual workers cannot be measured on the hours worked but should be measured on results and the attainment of established goals, because those are the only issues which can be objectively measured in any event (Van Der Merwe, 2007). The ultimate responsibility of managers is to attain the goals of the organisation by

reaching the highest possible output with the lowest possible input of resources. Due to the lack of physical presence during telework, more indirect and delegated management will be adequate for virtual workers (Kondrat *et al.*, 2003).

Management by objectives (MBO) is used as a planning technique and is based on the belief that the joint participation of workers and managers in translating broad organisational goals into more specific individual goals has a positive impact on employee motivation (Smit *et al.*, 2003). "The importance of objectives or goals in management can best be seen by showing how MBO works in practice" (Smit *et al.*, 2003). The process of MBO can only be successful if it starts at the top of the organisation and has the support of top management. Management and employees should be educated about MBO and its role in it. Everyone must know that they have accepted it and should therefore be committed to it (Smit *et al.*, 2003). The system of MBO can be applied to virtual workers. Instead of the virtual workers being told exactly how to do their work they are given tasks or projects that must be completed and specific results that need to be achieved. The objectives and goals are not imposed by the manager, but they are set and agreed to by managers and virtual workers. Virtual workers are free to work at their own pace and have freedom of action. They must decide on the best way to achieve their goals and objectives. The manager will measure their performance according to the accomplishment of the goals and objectives and not how employees follow the instructions of the manager to complete a task.

Workers need to set targets for their own objectives, commit themselves to attain these targets and evaluate themselves on how they have met these objectives (Keeling, 2000). The supervisor needs to give feedback to the employees as to how they have reached their goals. Employees need to discuss the problems they have experienced. New goals need to be set if deviations occurred. Managers need to do a regular evaluation of performance, goals, and expectations in order to detect problems or weaknesses early (Van Der Merwe, 2007). Another essential aspect of virtual teams is their ability to make use of the features of an electronic environment. Burtha (2004) reference several methods of communication for use in virtual teams including, but not limited to: websites where team leaders and members can post lessons learned, internal

electronic Bulletin boards to be used as a medium for asking and answering questions as well as receiving suggestions from each other, and conference calls, e-mail, and video conferencing tools to deliver both written and verbal communication which helps to satisfy the specific communication needs of each individual on the team.

In a conventional, co-located team environment, supervising and monitoring performance is often accomplished by walking around and personally checking on the Activities of each team member. As Platt (2001) indicated, however, for Managers of virtual teams – management by walking around involves travelling to different buildings, cities, states, or perhaps even different countries to accomplish the same task.

Bellingham (2001) suggests that clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of everyone enables a team to know exactly what each member is expected to do to achieve their goals and objectives. By delineating roles, team members are also better equipped to provide appropriate levels of support to one another throughout the course of a project or task. Additionally, by sharing information and negotiating expectations, conflict can be reduced, or more easily resolved when differences in perception occur, making the performance management process more accurate and fairer. To be successful in virtual groups, therefore, people must have much more independence and decision-making capability than people typically do in bureaucracies (Suazo, 2006). People who form teams that cross boundaries need to know more, decide more, and do more. This is made possible by clear purpose and personal commitments together with open, accessible, comprehensive information environments. A virtual leader, therefore, should focus on balancing and sharing the control within their team because too little or too much control can lead to the same outcome, low satisfaction. Exerting too much control can be construed as over-managing, not caring what team members think, and not valuing the ideas of others (LaFasto, 2001). All tasks must be assigned and subsequently effectively managed in the context of any team. In a virtual team, however, the following unique challenges presented by Bellingham (2001) may be associated with this responsibility:

- Evaluation is difficult because day-to-day performance is not observed.

- The person who leads the team may not be the boss.
- A person's role in a cross-functional team may not be the same as their job description.
- One person may be on five different teams at the same time.
- When a person has multiple bosses, all bosses tend to assume they have the person 100 percent.

Nonetheless, leaders must find strategies to manage performance accurately, fairly, equitably and consistently. Furthermore, team members must be held accountable for the tasks they have been assigned. Dziak (2001) recommends the following tips creating an effective virtual work environment:

- Establish the ground rules.
- Be prepared to enforce the policy.
- Practice effective meeting management.
- Provide effective support.
- Manage all direct reports by results.

He goes on to suggest that managers break employee work into objectives, projects, tasks, and action items. Assigning, tracking, evaluating, and rewarding work outputs using these specifics dramatically improve a manager's knowledge of work activities, consistency in establishing expectations, and ability to objectively determine whether those expectations are being met. Leading a geographically dispersed workforce from an e-leadership perspective may pose several unique challenges if the virtual workforce has no trust in e-leadership (Avolio *et al.*, 2000). Trust is defined by Avolio *et al.* (2000), quoting Mayer *et al.* (1995) as "the willingness of a team member to be vulnerable to the actions of another team member(s) based on the expectation that the other(s) will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control another team member(s)." Trust is critical in virtual work since direct supervision, similarity in backgrounds, and experience and a common form of social control in traditional workforce are not feasible (Ejiwale, 2008). Hence, leadership in the virtual workforce should

facilitate the formation of trust-building in a virtual workforce context. As a result, the effects of leadership on trust should not be underestimated. Since this approach is transformational, such leadership should instill confidence among virtual workforce team members about the ability of individuals in their team through: (a) individualized consideration, whereby the leader considers and encourages consideration of input provided by every member of the team and; (b) inspirational motivation, whereby the leader expresses confidence in team members' collective ability to accomplish a task all members identify with (Avolio *et al.*, 2000).

Other challenges to consider as more organizations implement a virtual and remote workforce model, is the need to address unforeseen modifications in structure, procedures, technology, management, and other operational aspects increases. With off-site staff, leaders will need to explicitly communicate the values and culture of the organization to ensure understanding and acceptance (Ware, 2010). Despite the challenges associated with remote work environments, increasingly, staff has come to expect to work off-site not as a privilege or perk but as a normal part of their job (Advantage, 2014). When organizations migrate to a remote work environment, a number of factors must be considered. Such factors include recruiting, pay structure, performance measurement, how bonds and connections between workers will be developed to form a team, operational protocols, and training. Moreover, organizational culture and the recognition and understanding of cultural diversity are key areas of focus. Transitioning from a command orientation and bureaucratic hierarchical culture requires not only training but commitment (Flood, 2018). Successful remote workers will be self-directed, motivated, resourceful, and able to identify their own career paths. Unlike employees who relied on management's detailed direction, leaders will need to recognize and cultivate talent that can solve problems, network with their peers, and direct their own projects (Hickman, 2018). An essential role of leadership will be to build personal relationships as this may be the only connection workers have with the organization and how they form their impression of it.

Though some managers may assume that remote and on-site employees can be managed the same way, there is a great difference between the two. Without physical proximity to fellow workers and the commensurate social element associated with

an on-site workplace, the remote employee may feel isolated. Without visual cues, body language, and face-to-face communications developed with day-to-day contact, there are less team cohesion, trust, camaraderie, and satisfaction with the team (Floody, 2019). Without a sense of belonging, it is difficult for remote workers to understand the role they play and build a shared sense of purpose.

A micromanagement style will no longer work for a remote workforce that thrives on autonomy. Without seeing individuals face-to-face, new communication etiquette must be developed. Unlike situations where a manager can pop into an office in physical proximity to clarify, correct, or update objectives, remote employees require better upfront communication and regular updates. Learning how to build trust throughout the organization will become an essential part of organizational culture (Ware, 2010).

4. Results and Discussion

Research has proved that the paradigm shifts in the corporate world of work – anytime, anywhere, in real space or in cyberspace is here to stay. Virtual workers and managers working away from the office is now a reality and will become more common in the future. Companies who wait for the future to allow the virtual office to effectively take shape may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. Now is the time for companies to create the conditions for the virtual office to emerge. Given the benefits of connectivity and effective information sharing among stakeholders, many industries have continued to seek its application and implementation. Therefore, the success of coordinating work among a virtual workforce depends on "effective indirect communication" between the leadership and the virtual workforce (Ejiwale, 2008).

Adopting a remote workforce model has eased hiring for many organizations and increased access to talent (Floody, 2019). It has been predicted that those who refuse to adopt this new model risk losing their current employees as well as potentially overlooking future talent. Multiple, converging factors are influencing the shift in workplace staffing and leadership roles. Major advances in technology, a shortage of talent, and new generational expectations are at the forefront. In many cases, companies offer employees a remote work environment out of necessity. Global companies in the technology and other sectors employ highly skilled employees

regardless of their geographic residence (Advantage, 2014). Though most organizations are using a remote workforce and have technological systems in place to support them, many do not have policies in place for off-site workers. Organisations that have implemented policies believe they have become more lenient and inclusive (Floody, 2019). Still, for those who grew up in a traditional management style, it may be difficult to alter long-held beliefs. The era of managing while walking around and using visual cue to check on employee well-being is changing.

While outcomes and performance are key metrics to determine the effectiveness of staff, another essential characteristic to successful remote management is mutual trust between staff and leadership (Younger, 2017). Relationships at the office are born from comradery, collaboration, and personal interaction. From these, trust develops creating a sense of cohesion and confidence in each other. Lacking physical interaction, management must develop a trust that virtual teams can effectively communicate, self-manage their time, possess motivation, and have resourcefulness to deliver results (Advantage, 2014). Technology can be used to see faces, hear voices, build teams, brainstorm, and share socially. Team events, whether in person or virtual, need to occur to provide a sense of belonging. Such events offer remote and on-site staff an opportunity to experience a different side of their teammates through body language, sense of humour, and personal stories. Moreover, such events provide an opportunity to recognize remote staff in front of their peers for job performance (Floody, 2019).

A report by the Gartner Group states that as of 2008, 41 million corporate employees globally telecommute at least 1 day a week, a figure that jumps to 100 million for telecommuting at least 1 day a month. Most of these are U.S. employees, as U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that as many as 15 percent of employed people now telecommute one or more times per week. From the employee perspective, telecommuting is associated with higher job satisfaction and has been widely advocated as a solution to the challenges individuals face in reconciling their personal and work lives. Telecommuting can allow individuals to have greater control over work-family boundaries and to schedule work at times of peak efficiency or around family needs (Lautsch, 2011). The reduction in commute times that results from telecommuting also frees temporal resources that can be devoted to family or job

needs, as employees often substitute commuting time for additional work time. Successful global virtual teams thrive in organizations that foster vibrant communication, interaction, trust, clarity of task and team goals, and the development of a global team-based body of knowledge (Govindarajan, 2001).

Within the next decade, companies anticipate that more than one third of their full-time, permanent workforce will work remotely (Floody, 2019). Complimenting on-site staff with remote expertise can provide huge benefits to companies including cost savings, speed, and flexibility (Younger, 2017). Leading a distributed workforce requires resources, formal policies, and new ideas to create teams who will be relied on to achieve goals and objectives. Performance management, training, communication, and relationship building take on a different level of complexity when employees are not on-site and dispersed across multiple time zones and varied cultures (Hickman, 2018), all of which challenge the ability of managers to adequately motivate, coach, and develop employees within a virtual environment. This increasing trend will require new leadership skills in an era where staff no longer work in the office next door.

Emerging leaders who will manage the remote workforce of today and into the future will be markedly different from the leadership of the twentieth century (Hickman, 2018). A new workforce with flexible work hours that cater to their lifestyle and wide geographic mobility will demand it. The top-down decision model will give way to autonomous and agile workers capable of self-management and motivation as well as resourcefulness (Flood, 2018). Managing staff from a distance is vastly different than managing face-to-face. Beyond technical and business skills, leadership must acquire specialized aptitudes for coaching, adaptability, career guidance, communicating, interpersonal relationships, and developing cultural sensitivity (Advantage, 2014).

Implementing a remote workforce will require an overhaul of formal training programs for all levels of the organization from top leadership to down. There will be a need to raise awareness of the new work environment and its implications (Ware, 2010). Protocols and measurement matrices will be required to measure performance, thus requiring closer collaboration between human resources, procurement, legal, and information (Dessain, 2014). Expectations which are specific, measurable,

action-oriented, realistic, and time-bound must be communicated. Human resources must now embrace a new paradigm of a virtual workforce that is hyper connected through technology (Kennelly, 2015). While a remote workforce will present its challenges, it also presents an opportunity for employee loyalty and retention. Instead of losing a valued employee when personal circumstances create a need for relocation, remote work helps retain these valued employees plus their institutional knowledge. The costly expenses to recruit, hire, and train a replacement are reduced or eliminated (Ware, 2010). Learning to work on a global virtual team, across spatial, cultural, and linguistic barriers involves adaptation to new knowledge, practices, and attitudes (Neeley, 2017). Adaptation, however, can be a significant ask of people who have important technical responsibilities in the company.

Ricard (1993) suggests the following formula for balancing the cross-cultural communication process: attitudes help us decide to do something; having knowledge helps us know what to do; and having skills helps us do whatever we decide to do. Therefore, in a virtual team, members must be able to recognize their attitudes about the differences of his or her teammates, know, from the other person's cultural perspective what needs to be done about the difference, and then be equipped with the appropriate skills to effectively handle the situation. In other words, the key to achieving high performance in diverse teams is to move beyond a tolerance for differences and discover value in diversity (Soles, 2005).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Virtual managing has become increasingly prominent in recent years and is emerging as one of the most common trends of today's corporate culture, organisations may find themselves falling behind the industry standards if they do not invest the time and effort to enhance the effectiveness of their virtual leaders. A virtual leader's inability to establish trust among their team members, communicate effectively and manage team members' performance and accountability will result in their teams operating at standards of performance that are well below those of the teams headed by leaders who are effective in managing these organizational dynamics.

Each generation of leadership will need to embrace the new paradigm of doing business. It is a new

workforce and new workplace. Remote working is expected to increase substantially with the generational shift of the workforce, continued technological advancements, and expanded globalization. Preparing for and addressing these challenges enables the organization to inculcate an inclusive remote workforce culture. The right leadership will build trust with constant contact, encourage open dialogue, and cultivate collaboration (Kennelly, 2015). As organizations move toward a remote workforce, the more virtual they become, the more essential the leadership skills. The increased efficiency of virtual workers does not only result in enhanced productivity, but the added flexibility of virtual work. However, if this workforce is not well managed, its implementation may constitute waste rather than fulfilling its anticipated outcome of increasing productivity (Ejiwale, 2008). For Managers to effectively manage a virtual workforce, the author recommends the following:

- **Prioritise Communication**

Communication is key as it helps to enable both employees and managers to share ideas for the greater good of the organisations. Platforms such as the use of email can be utilised and well as schedules video calls and phones calls lest employees have to drop everything to go online for a meeting that was not scheduled.

- **Encourage Employees to Set Boundaries**

The virtual office can be a challenge especially where one is working from home and children do not fully comprehend that the parents are working even though they are home. It is therefore important for employees to set boundaries such that when they are working they are not disturbed and that they can be accessed by family members via phone calls or during their lunch break.

- **Promote Transparency**

Transparency is very important in any organisation. The virtual organisation is no different and therefore every decision, or planning should be shared with employees despite being in different places. Consultations should be done just as in a traditional office where employees can be easily convened for a meeting. This allows employees to have a say in the mechanics of their organisation. This also averts conflicts as everything will be public knowledge.

- **Check-in on Employees Regularly**

Checking on employees regularly is very important as the manager cannot move around offices to check on the employees. Phone calls, video calls, emailing are ways in which managers can engage with employees.

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