COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

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Abstract: In recent years, organizations operate more and more with virtual teams, but they must be organized and managed efficiently. Therefore, the paper briefly presents the main aspects of communication management in virtual teams. The work is structured in 3 parts: introduction where is presented the context of the subject, the 2nd part focuses on general aspects regarding the virtual teams (concept, factors that contribute to the formation of virtual teams, and types of virtual teams). The 3rd part presents the communication management of virtual teams (organization and management of virtual teams), and finally a management model in virtual communication is conceptualized.

Keywords: virtual team, management, communication, conceptual model, efficiency

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1. Introduction

Work and of course virtual communication have gained momentum in recent years due to the expansion of globalization and as a result of the spread of international companies around the globe.

With so many employees scattered across the globe, the use of telecommuting—working from a remote location—helps employees check in and be productive no matter where they are.

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For example, Upwork reports that 40.7 million American professionals will be fully remote in the next five years—a 6 percent increase from 2020. According to Buffer's 2022 State of Remote Work survey, 67 percent of remote workers enjoy flexibility in how they spend their time, 62% like having a flexible workplace and 59% say they have more time because they don't physically commute (USC, 2023).

A byproduct of the global economy and telecommuting is the rise of the virtual team, a group with all members joining electronically from around the world to work together. Now more than ever, the use of virtual teams is common among companies. Today's global economy requires a unique and more efficient work environment. Virtual teams are made up of employees who are the best at their jobs, but who don't necessarily live near their company headquarters. These teams use remote communication and technology for business success.

For example, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 60.2% of organizations have expanded remote work and expect to continue using virtual teams. In the future, 72% of business executives plan to incorporate new software and platforms to help their virtual teams collaborate more effectively, and 65% of US technology companies will maintain or even increase their international workforce. at a distance (USC, 2023).

Therefore, virtual teams are becoming more and more common due, on the one hand, to the rapid advance of information technology, and on the other hand, to the amplification of knowledge-based work.

To work effectively in this new modern landscape, it is important for employees and managers to understand the concept of virtual teams and best practices for remote collaboration (Robinson, 2022; Ferrazzi, 2014).

In this context, the paper focuses on a general presentation of the virtual team concept and on the management of communication within virtual teams. A conceptual model of communication management of virtual teams is also proposed.

The research methodology is based on theoretical investigations, analysis, synthesis and conceptualization.

2. Virtual teams. General aspects

2.1. The concept of the virtual team

Virtual teams are groups of geographically dispersed people who work together to achieve a common goal, exchange information, knowledge and resources and communicate with each other through information technology (Ristea, 2023, p.120).

These teams tend to operate entirely out of virtual offices, and many lack a centralized base or don't visit the premises very often. The structure of virtual teams varies by industry, company and department. Some virtual employees follow a traditional 9-5 schedule, while others are allowed a more flexible schedule and can work anytime as long as they work the estimated number of hours each week. Usually, the organization or manager sets the standard for when and how employees are expected to be online.

Typical virtual teams are 100% remote and rarely meet, and remote work is the default. In contrast, hybrid teams work remotely part-time and, in the office, or have some team members work remotely while others collaborate in the office. Non-remote and on-site teams work in the same space 100% of the time. Companies can have a mix of in-person, hybrid, and remote teams, and employees can be members of multiple teams.

For example, maybe managers regularly meet and exchange ideas online, but rarely meet in person. Or, a project leader can form a team of international employees to work on a special assignment from their respective parts of the world. Organizations that traditionally work on-site should still hone virtual work and management best practices, as the need to collaborate virtually may occasionally arise (Teambuilding, 2022).

2.2. Factors contributing to the formation of virtual teams

Virtual teams are formed due to three factors: the process of globalization, the rapid development of information technology and

financial performance in conditions of fierce competition, each of which has causes that cannot be neglected.

The process of globalization has led to the emergence of multinational companies, which reside in one country, but have branches, factories, outlets, offices in other countries, so that the teams working in these companies are composed of personnel from different countries, with a sometimes very different organizational culture. Geographical distance is no longer a barrier to baking the most suitable employees in teams (Ristea, 2023, p.122).

The physical distance does not remove the communication, but it can lead to new approaches, and in some cases, it diminishes or removes labor or other conflicts. It also helps to increase responsibility and to develop creativity and technological innovation in many fields of activity. (Negulescu & Doval, 2021)

The rapid development of information technology has facilitated communication between team members. The techniques used have evolved from telephone, text messages, chat, audio-conferencing, video-conferencing (Serrat, 2017) to 3D holograms (Sivunen and Nordback, 2014), as well as business avatars and instant messages on social networks (Gilson et al., 2015). In addition, generations of young people Y and Z prefer, compared to those of generation X, remote work in their chosen free time, instead of the stable office and the fixed work schedule (Twenge et.al, 2010).

Organizational performance is a permanent goal, so company management is looking for cost reduction solutions to be able to maintain or increase profit. The main way to reduce costs is to identify cheaper material and human resources. In this sense, they choose raw materials and components from different regions of the globe, but also lower paid labor compared to the companies' country of origin.

By forming virtual teams, companies have access to talented human resources without geographical restrictions (Serrat, 2017), represented by people with valuable knowledge, relationships and information (Kianto et.al., 2014), at a low cost.

2.3. *Types of virtual teams*

Practice demonstrates the existence of several types of teams (Indeed, 2023; CFI Team, 2023) (table 1).

Table 1. Types of virtual teams

No.	Type/Use	Features and benefits
1	**Teams in the network**/ Technology and consulting companies	A network team is a group of individuals with subject matter expertise who come together to achieve a common goal. The team is generally made up of employees both inside and outside of a single company. Roles in a networked team are fluid, and people are added or removed based on what tasks are needed and what tasks have been completed. *Benefit*: customers benefit from any request
2	**Parallel teams**/ Multinational companies selling their own products	The parallel team is made up of people who are all part of the same company and are tasked with addressing a problem or system and making recommendations for its improvement. *Benefit:* brings together a wide range of opinions and expertise useful to clients.
3	**Product development teams**/ Multinational companies focused on innovation	The product development team is made up of people with specialized knowledge on a particular topic, who come together to achieve a common goal for the company itself, forming the research and development department of the company. *Benefit:* helps the business become more innovative by creating new products or technologies
4	**Production teams**/ Marketing firms, publishing studios and software development companies	The production team consists of members who carry out the day-to-day work and each team member works independently on clearly defined roles or tasks. When combined, their individual work contributes to a larger project or goal. These types of teams often work together for an extended period of time and are given a new project or goal to work on once the first one has been completed. *Benefit:* Provides jobs that are often task oriented and can be done practically with ease.

No.	Type/Use	Features and benefits
5	**Independent teams/** Companies that need written or visual content created	The freelance team is a combination of a production team and a network team. People work together for varying lengths of time, completing individual tasks and jobs that contribute to a larger goal. It is made up of creative people (writers, editors and graphic designers). *Benefit:* The team is hired on an as-needed basis to help create a more interesting and profitable product.
6	**Service teams/** Companies that sell products or software	The service team consists of people who live in different time zones so that there is never a break in communication with customers. *Benefit:* 24-hour customer support is provided.
7	**Action teams/** Engineering companies or those that need solutions quickly	The action team is used for a very short duration and is made up of experts who can address a specific objective. Once the objective is met, the group is immediately disbanded. *Benefit:* Has the ability to take action to implement solutions to an avoided problem.
8	**Management teams/** Companies with offices in widely distributed locations	The management team consists of administrative staff from a single company, who mainly discuss the corporate strategies and goals that their staff will later implement. *Benefit:* Helps keep management staff in communication with each other, increase company efficiency, and meet long-term goals.
9	**Offshore IT systems development teams/** Software development companies	The team usually consists of two organizations: a parent company and a smaller company. The smaller company, often found in a location around the world that is considered low-cost, is hired to help the parent company complete sections of work. *Benefit:* provides companies with expert skills at a lower cost to create products.
10	**Hybrid teams/** Companies that have sales teams all over the world	The hybrid team is made up of a combination of companies and virtual employees. Virtual employees use their own regional location to produce their work for the company. *Benefit:* Higher sales rates for the company

Source: according to Indeed, 2023; CFI, 2023

3. Virtual teams management

3.1. Building the virtual team

The starting point in setting up the virtual team is choosing the composition of the team with suitable people for virtual work, in the right size and dividing the work accordingly (Ferrazzi, 2014).

• *Team composition.* People who work in virtual teams have in common good communication skills, high emotional intelligence, the ability to work independently and the resilience to recover from the troubles that inevitably arise. Awareness and sensitivity to other cultures are also important in global groups. Typically, when building a team, leaders should conduct behavioural interviews and personality tests to check for all of these qualities.

• *Team size.* Teams have become increasingly large, sometimes even exceeding 100 people for complex projects, according to one study. But practice shows that, from large multinationals to small start-ups, the most effective virtual teams are the small ones – less than 10 people. Research shows that team members reduce effort when they feel less accountable for results. The effect kicks in when teams exceed four or five members. As groups grow, another challenge is ensuring inclusive communication. Thus, to optimize the performance of the group, do not gather too many members.

• *Roles in the team.* When projects require the efforts of several people from different departments, appropriate sub-teams are created. The approach is similar to the X-team strategy (backed by MIT professor Deborah Ancona), which defines three levels of team members: core, operational, and external. The core consists of executives responsible for strategy, the operational group leads and makes decisions about the day-to-day work but does not address the larger issues handled by the core, and the outer network consists of temporary or part-time members who they are brought into a certain stage of the project because of their specialist expertise.

3.2. Communication management in virtual teams

For virtual teams to be effective, they must be properly managed to facilitate proper communication. To this end, virtual team leaders act to stimulate mutual trust, encourage open dialogue and clarify objectives and guidelines.

• *Boosting confidence*. Trust starts with respect and empathy. From the beginning, leaders should encourage team members to get to know each other and establish camaraderie. At the beginning, each team member is asked to describe their environment or provide a video tour of the workspace to form a mental image associated with that person. Or, ask at the start of the teleconference that everyone share a recent professional success or some personal news to overcome isolation and get to know each other.

• *Encouraging open dialogue*. Each team member is required to be honest with others and provide thoughtful feedback (e.g., I would suggest..., I also thought about...).

• *Clarification of objectives and guidelines*. Team leaders must establish a common goal or vision, while framing the work in terms of individual team members' needs and ambitions and establishing communication rules. Specific guidelines for team interaction are equally vital as rules reduce uncertainty and increase trust in social groups, thereby improving productivity. Virtual collaboration requires everyone to be mentally present and involved, so videoconferencing is the most appropriate working method, complete with email for details. The fun and camaraderie also matches any personal peer experience while ensuring people are engaged in conversation and focused on the specific tasks or topics at hand.

Experience shows that managers who have previous experience in managing dispersed teams are generally successful, since success in the correct management of groups that work physically in one location is not guaranteed in the management of virtual teams.

3.3. Conceptual management model in virtual teams' communication

The experiences analysed regarding the management of communication in virtual teams led to the conceptualization of a model (fig.1), which highlights 4 modes of virtual communication.
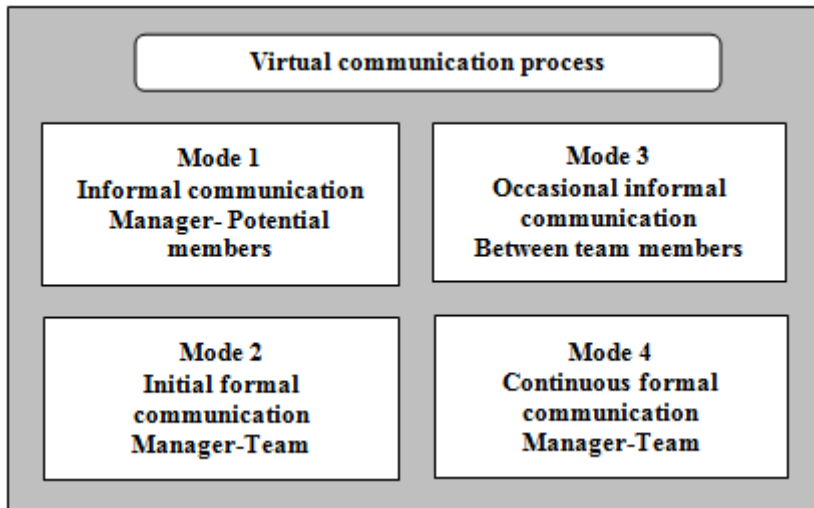
Virtual communication process

Mode 1 Informal communication Manager- Potential members	Mode 3 Occasional informal communication Between team members
Mode 2 Initial formal communication Manager-Team	Mode 4 Continuous formal communication Manager-Team

Fig. 1. *Process in four modes in management communication in virtual teams*

(Source: author's conception)

Before starting the activity with the virtual team, the manager proceeds with the following activities:

• Establishing objectives.

• Establishing the size of the team according to the objectives.

• Establishing communication modalities and means of communication.

• Elaboration of behavioural and ethical procedures to eliminate or limit deviations.

• Selection of team members, according to the required skills.

• Distribution of roles and tasks.

Mode 1 Manager-customized informal communication

The manager analyses the intentions to participate in the team and the CVs and communicates with each potential member of the team, using, as a rule, WhatsApp, but also/or phone and video conference.

Mode 2 Initial formal communication Manager-team

It is a formal communication with the members of the selected team, even if some people were part of the manager's team. Proceed to:

• presentation of team members

• clarification of team objectives and behavioural and ethical procedures

• communication of roles and tasks

• elimination of inconsistencies

By establishing everyone's role and responsibility, miscommunication is avoided. Presenting a communication guide can help prevent misunderstandings and the team will know which communication tools to use and when (video conference, email, phone, messaging, etc.).

Mode 3 Casual informal communication between team members

Informal communication is carried out through conversations or written messages by phone, WhatsApp or videophone and has the purpose of:

• Eliminating misunderstandings regarding objectives, tasks, procedures

• Mentoring for new members

• Progress in relationships, trust and involvement

Team members feel free to express their ideas and concerns and learn from each other how to solve the tasks they receive. They may use WhatsApp, email, phone, messaging,

Mode 4 Continuous formal manager-team communication

• Motivating team members for involvement

• Solving difficult problems

• Feedback on reports

• Appreciation for performance

Team members are satisfied if they receive feedback and give feedback, so they continuously improve their skills for solving tasks and a better communication.

The common communication means should be videoconferences and email to send reports and to get feedback.

A virtual team becomes effective when differences are resolved quickly and there are no conflicts. For this purpose, the manager or the team leader will reanalyse the team composition and the factors that can disrupt the smooth running of the activities. The main factors that lead to conflicts in organizations are personality differences, wrong perception, incompatible goals, organization structure, contradictory roles, task interdependence, employment situations, reward systems, power relations, rivalries, and limited resources. (Negulescu, 2024).

The virtual team is or may become efficient, but the main problem that can appear in communication is related to the type of technology used in the different corners of the world, especially the web connection. That's why the preferences in the means of virtual communication are different.

For example, there are cultural differences in technology preferences (e.g. Brazil prefers richer technology like videoconferencing, compared to the United States, who prefer email and chat) (I-O AT WORK, 2015).

The proposed model can be a useful tool, of course supplemented with aspects specific to companies, in the organization and efficient management of communication in virtual teams.

4. Conclusions

The importance of virtual communication and work in virtual teams is continuously increasing. To be able to work in a virtual team, team members can live in different countries, but they must use a common language, usually English, possess the necessary technology and have the necessary skills to use it.

In order for a virtual team to communicate effectively, clear rules transmitted by the manager or team leader regarding the manner of behaviour and ethics in communication are necessary. Also, the roles and responsibilities of the team members must be clarified from its establishment.

Through effective communication, relationships of trust and respect can be established, conflicts are minimized and job satisfaction increases, as well as the organization's performance. Virtual team members are satisfied as long as teams can manage conflict effectively, have reliable technology, are committed to goals, and demonstrate learning behaviour. The mechanisms for enhancing virtual team success include: perceptions of quality and connectedness to the team, early goal formulation, positive social environment, predictable communication patterns, structured procedures, group-based rewards, and training interventions (Gilson et al. 2015).

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