### NAVIGATING HR IN A VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

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#### **Abstract**

A virtual team is mainly comprised of geographically discrete professionals connected by technology in a global business environment. It gives an opportunity for employers to conquer skilled and talented people across borders to serve customers worldwide, and for employees, it provides a flexible career with work-life balance. However, in practice, managing a virtual team is complex due to cross-border cultural differences, diversity, technology, and social and environmental differences. Managing virtual team administration, communication, and collaboration can be cluttered due to a lack of interpersonal relations and a lack of trust between team members. However, in the current intense globalized business trend, virtual employment is sharply increasing as a work culture in the new generation workforce, leading to a greater emphasis on human resource management. This paper reveals the challenges of virtual teams and best HR practices to minimize complications of virtual team management. The opinion provided in this paper is based on the study conducted through existing research articles and some of the proceedings of contemporary popular business houses with virtual teams.

**Keywords:** Virtual Team, Team Building, Global Team, Remote Team.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

A radical increase in the remote workforce has developed a change in the model of business transactions through technology (Cascio, 2005). The interaction of geographically distributed individuals with common interests has facilitated the emergence of a modern organizational form, the "virtual team," to tackle global business competitions. The survey by the United States Society for Human Resource Management 2017 reveals that sixty percent of the business units offer benefits through distance communication (Tech, 2018). Data from UP-works reveals that current on-demand commitments of employment patterns with freelancers and outsourced contractors have risen by 81% from 2014 to 2018 (States, 2018). Some research also discloses a drastic increase in employee productivity and decreased employee attrition of remote workers as employees found happiness working remotely with better focus, influencing a better output. On the other side, through virtual employment, employers also found happy making an average saving of \$2000 every year on the logistical cost of each employee as per the survey (State, 2017)

However, there exist HR challenges to bring employees from different geographical areas, time zones, and distances together to perform a collective task, which is nearly critical. The arrangements of virtual team members are separated geographically with limited or no face-to-face contact—teams with common work goals intermediate through electronic media to perform organizational objectives. "One of the changes that have been introduced in recent years is the use of virtual teams. For many years, we have seen organizations use conference calls, teleconferencing, and telecommuting as ways of helping people do their jobs more effectively, efficiently, and conveniently. However, virtual teams go beyond even these advances" (Naideger, 2010).

# Virtual Workforce, a Work Culture Change

The volatile growth and demand for skilled virtual employees in contemporary global business are expanding due to global customer service necessities and are expected to see a sharp future rise in virtual employment. As per the survey conducted in 1300 business houses from 81 countries, it is reported that 86% of respondents are working as virtual team members in different organizational cultures. Globalization factors like rapid development of technology, IT, product innovation, networking (Services, 2017), social media, cultural collaboration, communication, the global market, work-life balance, and the changing work culture of the millennial generation, etc. are the main reasons for the rise in the virtual workforce.

In the past decade, growths of new technologies, economic reforms, and social transformation have established co-dependency with each other. For example - smartphones and laptops captivated huge global market demand, which impacted robust production, technological change and economic boom (Cavalcante, 2013). On the other hand, development of the Internet and telecommunication transformed the social media revolution, which piloted not only the virtual world but also inflated a change in people's knowledge and skill set (Review, 2017).

Business units across the globe began networking virtually in search of new markets, skilled workers, logistics, dealers, franchises, and other resources, which further facilitated a new virtual work culture, realizing the requirement of both employer and employee in a distant geographic location. Virtual connectivity of people using technology brought a change in employment culture where the presence of skills and output of an individual got recognized more than his physical presence. "It is now possible for teams not co-located -not in the same location to work together on projects. In fact, people can work collaboratively on projects from different sites worldwide if necessary, at different times, and even from different time zones. This is made possible by Computer Mediated Communication technology and by groupware and other software innovations that permit people to work together on programs, track the work and contributions, allow for communication between individuals and also with the entire group, and maintain collaboratively established core documents or project" (Naideger, 2010).

# **Outsourcing Conception**

Phenomenal changes in information technology helped to maintain stability in the transformation of virtual work culture for businesses (Terren, 2005). The outsourcing concept and moving away from work from visual closeness became universal in the 1990s as major multinational organizations accepted virtual culture to some extent. Companies like Motorola, Nokia, and Microsoft are some of the top organizations initially outsourced through the virtual employment trend (Crunch, 2011). Current virtual job demands are growing as major Fortune 500 companies like Amazon, Dell, American Express, GE, Oracle, Hartford, and United Health Group are now actively appointing virtual teams from the fields of engineering, healthcare, innovation, art and science, and many more for various jobs categories like sales, service, craft, software building, gaming, call center, data and back-office support, healthcare, etc.

Workplace requirements are experiencing an enormous change, with companies focusing on reducing physical office space expenditure and preferring to receive virtual support from employees who can work from their own space, either at home or outside (Klein, 2015). The popularity of teleworking captured service organizations is due to

access to information through cloud technologies and digital resource management. Skilled and Independent professionals opted for freelancing services, and the number of freelancers increased in the last decades due to people's preference for self-ownership and work-life balance (Klein, 2015). On the other hand, major development and promotion of startup culture boosted the virtual office concept. And virtual teams also came up as manpower solutions for small enterprises. The growth of the SME sector is also contributing largely to virtual employment and resource allocation. SMEs are witnessing major reforms in modern business with aggressive participation by adopting new technologies to reach maximum customers and explore new markets. However, globalization puts pressure on quality deliveries. Perhaps for SMEs sometimes, it may be difficult to meet the required business standards due to various reasons like scarcity of skills, insufficient funds, or local problems (Knight, 2000). Outsourcing / virtual employment plays a vital role in addressing these issues with the supply of skills and application of cost reduction techniques, which attracts new-generation SMEs to opt for virtual support.

The economic crisis of 2007 introduced several reforms, including reforms in government and international relations for the purpose of better business collaborations (Eichhorst, 2010). Western companies started to look for cost reductions, and the strategic outsourcing phenomenon increased where many companies began outsourcing jobs to India and China, where the required skills existed for a nominal payment (Raisinghani, 2010). The strategy of outsourcing helped the business units of developed countries to minimize financial burden by cross border contracts with such countries where skilled and economical labor is available.

Since the last decade, telecommunication and wireless communications changed the phase of business communication spectacularly. Industries observed a great shift in the technique of data collection, supply chain management, and customer services through digital media. The IT sector, as an innovative new field, influenced people to acquire skills in this sector. Business owners around the globe realized the advantages & threats of technology change and implemented rapid organizational change management for the purpose of their business retention (Barima, 2003). Top companies desired to hire people across the globe to acquire the best skills with economic advantages, which were contented through outsourcing to developing countries.

### The Millennial Impact

Several studies mention that there is a great impact and higher acceptance of virtual engineering personnel/teams in current businesses. This could be the result of people, especially millennials, the new generation of savvy employees, adopting virtual employment due to personal choices. This change in the work culture is also benefiting organizations to fetch skilled human resources, especially for project-based employment. Here, the demand perfectly matches with both employers and virtual employees who also would like to opt for term employment with personal freedom. "Organizational socialization interaction is interactive, involving newcomers and old timers' evaluations and commitments to each other and the organization, as well as newcomer's potential transition to important roles in the organization" (Sadaghiani, 2010).

The study from the Pew Research Center reveals that the millennial generation aged between 18 and 35 has become the largest workforce segment in 2015. The millennials show a typical nomadic character with often shifting jobs and places. Moreover, with a strong inherited understanding of technology, millennials are the perfect fit in the virtual

environment. Younger people have grown up with online socializing and networking, and their preference is not a 9 to 5 job. Many corporations have recognized the flexibility shift in the new generation workforce and adopted new strategies with options like working any time of the day, anywhere.

#### **Work-Life Balance**

Moreover, in contemporary organizational scenarios, every employee, in some or another, contributes to his work virtually out of his office space to balance personal and organizational requirements (Colihan, 2006). Taking work home, working through video conferences away from office space, replying to emails and business communications during off days, probably even while standing in a queue, attending online meetings while traveling and working in shifts, alternative hours to accommodate job requirements, etc, are all nothing but virtually working. So, someone does a similar task cent percent away from the organization's physical space becomes a remote or virtual employee.

Organizations also call this distribution of human resources as distributed employees, telecommuting, flexible workforce, flexible work arrangements etc. Organizations are increasing their reliance on virtual relationships in structuring operations for a global environment. Like all teams, virtual teams require a solid foundation of mutual trust and collaboration, if they are to function effectively. Identifying and applying appropriate team building strategies for a virtual environment will not only enhance organizational effectiveness but will also impact positively on the quality of working life for virtual team members.

# Virtual Employment, Rewards and Drawback

The advantages of virtual teams are that they comprise functional expertise, which includes physically dispersed professionals for 24/7 services using diverse time zone employees. It lowers the cost of travel and other overhead expenditures (Raisinghani, 2010). Virtual employment and technology have promoted the distribution of knowledge across geographical limitations effectively with cost savings. Today, organizations are successfully establishing their businesses across borders through virtual resources by cutting down logistical expenditures and so able to provide quality products and services to customers for competitive pricing (Team, 2011).

Disadvantages of virtual teams arise from communication and non-cooperation between teams due to differences in cultural practices. Lack of trust among the team members is observed as one of the major reasons for the non-collaboration of teams, resulting in lower engagement and minimal organizational commitments. Social distance and isolation are another major reason which contributes to personality development deficiency of team members.

Virtual teams are the most vulnerable clusters of organizations, frequently spiked by communication failures, power and leadership struggles, and internal team conflicts. If a service company, for example, has extensive teams working on certain projects, experiencing frequent communication breakdowns by the teams may stall the entire process and experience failure in project deliveries (Klein, 2015). Managing a successful virtual team needs an innovative technique of monitoring and supervision. Virtual teams are present everywhere today, but several research surveys report that corporations are adopting virtual culture rapidly, but a large percentage of virtual team members are never met by company officials personally.

# **Dealing with Challenges**

#### **Cultural difference:**

Today, global communities are easily accessible because of technological growth; however, one of the major barriers to communication could be cultural differences, raising several issues. Culture plays an important role in people's attitudes and behaviors. People belonging to certain work cultures understand the importance of work commitment, but some do not, and due to this, synchronizing work with organizational commitment will fail. Organizations require great endeavors to increase teams' potential.

Cultural differences can be dealt with in several ways. Through building guidelines that are fixed to the organization's structure but without obstructing the cultural circumstances of cross border teams. Through creating Personal contacts, employees can be motivated and consoled well by personal. The level of employee involvement can be improved by mediation and addressing employee's concerns generously. Good planning can only fetch the right talented and expert candidates. Most of the candidates in a virtual team are remote participants, and hence, the managers keeping up the plan and schedule of virtual meetings as per the remote candidate's time convenience will win the trust of the candidate, increasing the chances of his sustainability in the organization. As said by Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers – "Technology is no big deal, but what is most required is to develop faith and belief in people to accept they are good, elegant, give them the tools to get wonderful things in return" (Isaacson, 2012).

# A shift in work

The requirement of modern business is more into quality and demand and not really where the work is getting done. Industries have set up their part production or assembling units in different geographical locations based on the skills, resources, and economic manpower availability. Hence, what is measured here is the quality of the outcome within the speculated period, irrespective of where the parts are manufactured. Many industries have reported that the system of physical time punching is unfavorable to attracting and retaining talented fork force due to no flexibility perception by employees (Review, 2017).

A shift in mobilized but connected people has impacted a huge increase in the virtual workforce. One of the studies in the year 2017 reported that more than 43% of workers confirmed remote working at some point in some time of their careers. Gallup's report on the American workplace also claims that by 2020, fifty percent of the employment will go remote. The legacy of several software systems, emails, messengers, etc., changed the practices of people, shifting towards a new trend of working in a comfortable zone of their own. Technology and its addiction to people have redefined the route of interaction between people and organizations. Social media, cloud technology, smartphones, etc, have deeply impacted set-free changes in employee psychology.

Hence, the change in the nature of work has become one of the major drives in moving work itself to the virtual direction. Technology has made distance working even more seamless and easier.

### Flexibility as a competitive benefit for women workforce

One of the key components of human resource management that attracts the new generation of employees is job flexibility. The Gallup's report of the year 2016 indicates that flexible jobs and work from any location opportunities are influencing candidate's decision-making in job acceptance. Women candidates are more in numbers

comparatively who opt for flexible work conditions because of their greater involvement in raising young children. Flexibility and work-from-home strategies of the companies have attracted several women to approach employment through virtual platforms, making them work and earn without leaving their homes. Many committed, skilled women who were unable to leave home due to family care accepted employment through virtual platforms.

# Diversity in global business perception

A visionary organization always encourages people to be more creative and innovative, and such organizations continue in search of such new talent. The doors of virtual employment are enlarged to fetch more talent in the global territory with diversity. The Wall Street Journal recently published that some businesses are showing great increases in revenue after implementing remote employment policies for certain jobs. The productivity of the remote and in-office workers is always comparing and raising big questions in the business world. Forbes articles have clarified that it depends upon the nature of work, organization, and individual needs, revealing that job satisfaction of individuals is high when they work from home.

# Managing team

Managing a a virtual team is a great challenge, but implementing certain organizational hygiene factors can facilitate virtual collaboration with minimal complexity in a secure, skilled, and economically beneficial environment, leading to success. Several programs can be put forward to develop transparency and trust in virtual employees.

First, it is important to understand the major problems expressed by the virtual employees. One of the main problems is the non-interpersonal relationship between the organization and team members. A cultural difference contributes to misunderstanding, further leading to conflict. Research has focused on minimizing the gap between the management process and global virtual team perspectives by focusing more on employee well-being, providing them good training, flexible working models, fair pay measures, and career advancement opportunities to make employees job fit and job satisfied resulting with reduced team attritions (Barima, 2003).

There is evidence of bigger corporations like IBM backing out from distance work policies, which indicates certain problems the organization faced with the remote teams. However, the past way of functioning may not be a suitable solution in addressing the modern business environment. Specific remedies can only alert the team members to support the collaboration of virtual employees emerging from all corners of the world. "Managing a virtual team requires managers to double down on the fundamentals of good management, including establishing clear goals, running great meetings, communicating clearly, and leveraging team members' individual and collective strengths," says Julie Wilson, founder of the Institute for Future Learning and Instructor at Harvard University.

Let us look at the three major problems companies encounter with virtual employees and try to provide possible solutions.

#### Communication

Good communication can lead to a good interpersonal relationship. However, a suitable process to build good communication is important. Strong cultural differences a barriers to smooth communication; perhaps building a communicative culture in the

organization can ensure accurate information flow, reducing barriers in the virtual teams (Eichhorst, 2010). As an implication, during the hiring process, communication can be treated as an important factor, and virtual candidates can be tested by various means. Concluding one's communication skills in a single interview may not fetch the right candidate. Instead, multiple interview rounds on different media platforms can be tested. It is also important to check the writing skills and on-call skills of remote employees before hiring. To help a good fit of the candidate in the company, it is necessary to provide the candidate with information about the company's culture and the importance of communication in the work process.

It is important for managers to foster a culture of communication with the virtual teams on a regular basis. Providing updates, taking check-ins, etc., can make the distance employee perceive his manager as a good communicator, and usually, employees express behavior in the same manner as their supervisors. Employees tend to follow the great habits exhibited by their mentors (Klein, 2015). Exhibiting a guideline that speaks about how workplace communication should happen, the kinds of messages that can be sent through different mediums, respecting the different time zones, how to interact with each other remotely, and company expectations, etc., can be provided with written guidelines.

Addressing the language barrier of different locations, good training on effective communication and language barrier can reduce the misunderstanding consequences in virtual employees. For example, advising employees of native English-speaking countries to avoid slang. The idea of face-to-face meetings of virtual teams occasionally, if the company can afford will be an ideal strategy for virtual team building with an opportunity to greet and meet each other. Technology is the reason for the origin and growth of virtual teams. Selecting the best tools, for example user, friendly software, can make the work simpler and also easier. Some of the best tools that can be considered are – chat tools, project management tools, web conferencing tools, prototyping, calendars and scheduling tools, automation tools, etc. Some tools may not fit well with the employee's environment where he performs work. It's advised to go for a trial version and consider the one most suitable for the employee environment. Providing training for the proper use of new tools can ensure accuracy.

# **Building Trust**

Trust is necessary for collaborative and shared work with minimal personal interaction. Employees need to develop trust with their managers and vice versa. A strategic structure, team building and responsibility sharing may help to develop trust in employees. Lack of trust is a major challenge due to lack of personal (Dangmei, 2016).

### **Setting up mission statement**

Study proves that millennials, in the majority, are nontraditional employees and can be driven through values and mission-driven statements (Review, 2017). They have higher feelings and satisfaction when they realize that their time and work have been used for something good. Setting up a mission statement with sensible expressions like - why this business? Why does it exist? what's its contribution to humanity? and put forward the mission statement to every employee working at a distance or near. Demonstrating the company's dedication to social causes like charity, volunteering, and working as a nonprofit can be expressed along with a mission statement. When social commitments relate to the work, employees possibly express job satisfaction and develop trust with the organization they are associated with.

# Team building and productivity

Team building promotes collaboration and helps bond with people. Knowing one another will develop confidence and trust among people. Shared ideas and thoughts have to be accepted, and when employees start building ideas for each other, their relationship will flourish with strength and greater trust. Creating familiarity with virtual team members through regular virtual meetings, videoconferences, etc., will establish confidence in team members. It is also important to set a shared goal.

Many times, low productivity risk is quite evident with virtual employees with low commitment and lower skill efficiency. Moreover, day-to-day physical supervision of work exists in virtual employment. Some employees may not keep up the time commitment and fail to utilize their time productively. Such a situation will affect productivity and create problems for the organization. Some of the best practices, like ensuring accountability, formation of a good supportive structure, and a good process development strategy, etc., can minimize the risk of productivity in virtual teams. In virtual employment, assaulting the privacy of the employees and forcing them to work may lead to job drops by the employees. At the same time, job accountability is also important in order to minimize the risk of productivity. Setting minimum expectations for each task and measuring the process from time to time, a weekly target, and a monthly target kind of deadline would allow managers to gauge the performances of individual employees. Meanwhile setting up such regulations and deadlines will also make employees held responsible for the work they deliver. Providing proper technical tools to measure work time spent and account of available hours will help employees for best utilization of remaining work time.

# Recognitions

Recognizing the best performers will create competency and bonding with the job. Go getters of the team tend to overlook the time spent but would prefer to deliver performances better than anyone working extra time and in holidays. The productivity of such members cannot be neglected. Their performance may set motivation for the rest of the team. Recognition of such performers has to be open to the knowledge of other team members. Once a month, announcing virtual meetings, especially to recognize the best performers with some incentive announcements, etc, can motivate employees for a better result.

Encouraging virtual employees to keep up standard business hours and utilize odd times for personal use exclusively is also an important process of virtual team management. Time of the day, weather, night, etc., can easily influence the mood of people, and work done during such hours may exhibit variations in production. Email sent at night times may not be as effective as the one sent during daytime. It is necessary that remote workers get some training on environmental influence, time of the day, mood swings, etc., and how to deal with such conditions without compromising on quality work.

There is a tendency for remote workers to fail to recognize priority tasks due to personal detachment from the organization. To overcome such problems, take small initiatives like the implementation of employee work charts and daily work reports, which can be analyzed by the managers frequently and provide feedback to employees on a regular basis. Each team member has to be made accountable for their performance but keeping track of workload is also a mandate to avoid any frustration of team members (Eichhorst, 2010).

Practicing a dynamic work distribution based on the culture of remote locations will support and induce better performances in members. Implementing a strategy of one-to-one direct reporting with the mentor and frequent monitoring of each virtual member may support a stress-free mind of remote workers. Sometimes short notice online meetings or video conferences may be more stressful for employees as managers usually represent from base location, and the condition and environment of remote locations are unknown. It is quite possible that employees at remote locations may not have enough information to share in a sudden meeting. Fixing pre-notified meetings can fetch more information, and employees will have enough time to prepare for their concerns. Good interaction and quality information sharing are possible with such arrangements.

### 2. CONCLUSION

Virtual team management is definitely a great challenge, but success and rewards are also at a greater intensity when the teams are driven to cohesive performances. Setting team objectives, recognizing the strengths of team members, ensuring benefits and scrutiny, etc., can ensure healthy and dynamic virtual team building. It is also important to understand that sometimes perceived strategies and decisions may bring adverse results, especially in a virtual environment. In such cases, the following approaches, like seeking external counseling, may support the organizations to reduce the complexity of handling virtual teams. Managing a virtual team is a challenge, but the change in the work culture of the new generation is quite significant with the increased virtual workforce. However, it is necessary that organizations embrace the prime responsibility of managing change to attain business sustainability. The labor market is becoming more dynamic as the countries connect with each other better with economic, cultural, and political interactions. Companies functioning in the global market must acknowledge the cultural, technical, and social challenges of managing virtual employees. "Teams face issues and business dynamics today that are challenging: needing to increase productivity and speed to market while streamlining processes and lowering production costs. High trust is essential to address these needs. Yet, trust comes with its own set of challenges. Trust is complex, meaning different things to different people, and while it can be positive or negative, it is emotionally provocative" (Reina, 2010).

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