



First Choice of the Fortune 1000 for L&D Consultants

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY MANAGE VIRTUAL TEAMS

Best practices, tips, and insights for partnering
with outsourced vendors



Whether you realize it or not, you probably already work virtually. When you want to schedule a meeting, do you walk around to each of the different attendees to talk about it, or do you send out an invite via email? Or when a colleague requests a document, do you print it out and hand-deliver it to them, or do you email the file instantly? Like it or not, you already work mostly in a virtual world, with other members of your team located somewhere other than the adjacent cubicle. So it's not a matter of whether or not you will work virtually, but how effectively you will manage your virtual work flow.

PICK THE RIGHT PEOPLE

According to G. Cutler, “virtual teamwork is 90 percent about people and 10 percent about technology.” In this type of work environment, where the success of the project is so heavily dependent on the type of people involved, both project managers and individual contributors must be chosen with care.

Not everyone is well-suited for the world of virtual work, so make sure that both the project manager and individual contributors on your team have the right mix of skills and attitudes required to successfully work in a virtual environment.

Virtual project managers should have:

- **Emotional intelligence**, which enables them to more easily establish connections with other team members
- **Enthusiasm**, which fuels an action-oriented attitude and motivates productivity on the part of the team
- **Superior communications skills**, which allow them to positively and consistently track project status and solve issues as they occur

Virtual team members should be:

- **Self-motivated**, since they often work in an isolated environment for extended periods of time

- **Disciplined**, so that they can manage themselves without a manager looking over their shoulder
- **Organized**, which allows them to stay on point and work to establish project goals
- **Reliable**, delivering quality work on time

MANAGE THE PROJECT EFFECTIVELY

Leadership style is especially crucial to the success of any virtual project. Among other things, effective leadership can create a stronger sense of group, which in turn encourages individual team members to stay on track, remain connected and collaborate more effectively.

In order to effectively manage a virtual team, project managers should:

- **Clearly define the project up front.** As with any project, planning is a crucial first step in the success of any project. To this end, the project manager should set clear expectations from the outset of the project, defining milestone-level tasks, dates and deliverables. Expectations should be reiterated routinely.
- **Build a sense of team.** Create a strong sense of group from the start, emphasizing collaboration and mutual support. In the beginning, this might entail introductions, ice breakers or other team-building strategies. Trust and social bonding are even more important than normal when your team is working together virtually.
- **Allow flexibility.** Let team members set their own work schedule to the extent possible. Your trust will normally be repaid in kind with increased responsibility on the part of individual contributors.
- **Manage by objective.** Manage the project by trusting rather than controlling people. Remember: a person can occupy their chair for 8 hours and still not get the job done. Achieving established project goals will always trump maintaining a rigid work schedule for others.

STAY IN TOUCH

Communication is an important component in the management of any project, but becomes even more crucial when team members are distributed geographically across different time zones and cultures. In order to maintain constant, open communication with team members, as well as facilitate the same level of communication between individual team members, the project manager should:

- **Schedule regular meetings.** Project managers should establish standard processes that span the entire course of the project, such as weekly brainstorming sessions, reporting vehicles or other events that keep everyone informed on the progress of the project, as well as deal proactively with risks and issues as they occur.
- **Communicate early and often.** Provide standard procedures for reporting, and use appropriate technology, such as instant messaging, to stay in touch on a regular basis with each team member. Also, identify and manage conflict between group members or with outside stakeholders as quickly as possible in order to minimize its impact on the project.
- **Leverage technology.** Use both “lean” and “rich” communication tools to facilitate better and deeper communication. Use “lean” communication tools, such as email, instant messaging, social media and wikis, for routine daily communications. Use “rich” communication tools, such as video conferencing, whiteboards and application sharing for SME reviews and brainstorming sessions.