

## A Multilevel Comparison Between the Virtual and Traditional Teams in Today's Environment

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**Abstract.** *There is a body of literature on virtual teams that is growing faster and faster; however, the knowledge about the benefits and the challenges faced by the virtual teams are still not very well outlined or spread. The purpose of this theoretical approach is to fill a part of this gap by reviewing specialized literature about the effectiveness of the virtual teams versus the traditional teams. Moreover, this paper underlines the challenges that are faced by the virtual teams (identity, culture, and diversity; leadership; communication and motivation; decision-making and conflicts; technology; creativity) and what are the best ways to cope with them. Switching to the new ways of communication and to this virtual society that was created, the way in which individuals are carrying their activities was impacted. We are nowadays almost totally bounded by technology and by the Internet, by sharing online everything that we are doing, by communicating with people from all around the world, by working with people from our countries like being in the same room. There is still much to learn about the virtual teams, about the best tools that can be used in order to make this type of teamwork and about how they can reach the best potential in order to be effective.*

**Keywords.** *Virtual teams, traditional teams, leadership, communication, diversity, culture, technology.*

### Introduction

Nowadays, everyone is talking about the potential of telecommunication or other different ways of working online, because working online became something that everybody experienced. A lot of people are reading or sending work-related e-mails from their homes, many are traveling with their laptops, cell phones or other kinds of devices that allow them to stay in touch on their business trips and even holidays. Moreover, more and more meetings include people who are present there only by their speakerphone or sometimes are held entirely as conference calls.

All of these, however, are the results of globalization, a process that was thoroughly described by Friedman (2000), in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*. He states that "Globalization emerges from below, from street level, from people's very souls, and from their very deepest aspirations. Yes, globalization is the product of the democratization of finance, technology and information, but what is driving all three of these is the basic human desire for a better life—a life with more freedom to choose how to prosper, what to eat, what to wear, where to live, where to travel, how to work, what to read, what to write and what to learn." (Friedman, 2000, p.333).

The trend of virtualization also brings up the new typologies of organizational structures and the new form of organizations, most of which are virtual, being a response to the complexity and turbulence of the nowadays business environment. Shortly, globalization and technology eliminated the space and time boundaries by opening new dimensions and opportunities for both individuals and businesses and organizations from all around the globe (Binsbergen, 1998; Canary, 2011).

This paper presents a multilevel comparison between the virtual teams and the traditional ones in today's environment and underlines that things such as creating a culture and an identity within the virtual environment, handling diversity, increasing the level of creativity by staying in front of a computer, handling the conflicts, encouraging communication and building trust among the team members, all require extra efforts in a virtual team.

### Literature review

In order to understand how today's global transformations are affecting businesses or organizations and the people that are working there as teams, we need to make the difference between what a group and what a team is. A group can be defined as a collection of more than three individuals that are interacting about a common problem or goal and that can exert mutual influence over each other (Pels et al., 2018). Teams can be defined as a specialized group with a strong sense of belonging and commitment which is shaping the overall collective identity (Khoshnoodi, 2018).

Virtual teams represent just another way of getting the work done. Both traditional teams and virtual teams are characterized by the fact that each member of the group is dependent on each other in order to accomplish the overall goal (Brown et al., 2007). When it comes to teamwork, many definitions say that "a team" is a special type of group (Giske, 2017; Wesner, 2018). Some theorists underline how team's behavior distinguishes it from a group, teams being defined as structured groups of people working on defined common goals that request coordinated interaction in order to touch their goals/objectives (Forsyth, 1999).

For as long as at least two human beings have worked together in order to accomplish a common goal/objective, teams have existed; moreover, for as long as companies and other types of organizations and institutions have had multiple offices (that are being located in different regions/ countries/ continents), virtual teams existed. According to Lipnack and Stamps (1997), what has changed over the years is the ease with which teams can communicate across time, space and organizations (Brown et al., 2007).

### **Virtual teams - a conceptual framework**

Nowadays, companies and organizations have extended and have branches in other regions of the country or sometimes outside the country. In this way, many situations of working with someone who is not physically in the same office, someone that we might have never seen in our life, someone with whom we cannot have last-minute meetings and with whom we should communicate using the virtual environment are exponentially growing.

According to different scholars, there are some key factors that differentiate virtual teams from the traditional them: geographic dispersion, electronic dependence, functional and cultural diversity and dynamic structure (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006).

When it comes to geographic dispersion, it is necessary to include both temporal and spatial dispersion. Spatial dispersion refers to the fact that team members can be distributed across different locations, creating a big impact on team creation and communication dynamics (Jiao et al., 2016). Temporal dispersion is defined as the extent to which team members have different working hours; however, temporal dispersion might be experienced also when team members are working in the same time zone or having the same working location due to work shifts (day vs. night shifts) (Shee-Mun & Thi, 2015).

Electronic dependence is defined by scholars as to the extent to which computer-mediated communication tools are used by the members of a team in order to execute the team processes (Gibbs et al., 2019). In order to have successful projects and to work on reaching their goals and objectives, virtual team members are using a great variety of computer-mediated communication tools (e-mail, video conferencing tools, instant messaging systems, intranet platforms, call conferencing tools and other technologies that are more complex).

Diversity is one of the main characteristics when it comes to virtual teams, as most of the time the members of the team are from different regions and are having different languages, cultures, traditions, values, and identities (Oliveira & Scherbaum, 2015). In this way, when there is a high diversity in a team, then this can create a source for stereotyping, conflicts between the members, communication barriers (Krawczyk-Brylka, 2016). In order to face the differences between the members of a team, it is important to develop a culture for the team, to create trust and supportive relationships; more than that, if possible, it is an advantage to ensure at least a face-to-face meeting, thus creating a stronger bond between the members of the team (Orhan et al., 2016).

The dynamic structure is another key characteristic of a virtual team and it indicates the degree of change or turnover of the members and also the changes that might occur when it comes to the roles of the

members and the relationships among them (Benetyte & Jatuliaviciene, 2014). It is very important to have a team culture, otherwise, the lack of shared history can create difficulty in assigning responsibilities, planning team development and locating expertise. However, all these challenges can be overcome if within the team trust, reciprocal relationships and commitment between the members are created.

### **A stepwise approach on virtual teams**

A number of team-building experts (here being included John Adair) identified three areas that should be taken into consideration when managing a project: the project, the team and the individuals (Portny et al., 2015). In their book - *Project Management for Dummies* -, Graham and Portny (2011) state that we cannot choose between the three areas, all of them having the same importance; this is why, in order to have the project done, attention should be paid to both the teams and the individuals.

Kozlowski and Bell (2003) define teams as being groups of people “who exist to perform organizationally relevant tasks, share one or more common goals, interact socially, exhibit task interdependencies, maintain and manage boundaries, and are embedded in an organizational context that sets boundaries, constrains the team and influences exchanges with other units in the broader entity” (Özok et al., 2009, p.3). Other scholars, such as Wageman, Gardner, and Mortensen (2012) describe teams as being a “bounded and stable set of individuals interdependent for a common purpose” (Wageman et al., 2012, p.33).

We can say that groups and teams are essential management key tools, as they are used by all kinds of organizations in order to implement different projects, to deal with critical decisions or changes and to succeed in this world that is constantly bringing challenges. Due to the fact that businesses and organizations aim to reach higher levels of performance, they have started to focus on creating high functioning groups. However, in order to have a compact team that is able to accomplish its goals and objectives, we should first know how to form it. In this way, Tuckman (1965) was the first one who proposed the stages model of group development in 1965 which included: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning.

Anyway, not all experts support the stage model of group development that was proposed by Tuckman. For example, according to Gersick (1988), the group is not developing through stages, but through phases, that include phase 1 (stability), transition (instability) and phase 2 (stability). From her point of view, the first phase establishes at the end of the first meeting (which is very important as it decides the climate, culture and direction of the new group that was formed). At the midpoint the group is characterized by a period of transition and instability; then, when the phase two starts, the group is stable again and has a defined structure that can guide the project in order to have its goals/objectives achieved (Dunham et al., 2015).

According to some studies (Chang, 2003; Dennis, 2019), these two models (Tuckman and Gersick's models) are “complementary and co-exist by functioning at two different levels of analysis” and it was “argued that the punctuated equilibrium model focuses on how a group works on a specific task, whereas the stage model's focus on the overall development of the group” (Dennis et al., 2019).

Going back to the more formal virtual teams, at the first glance, they are very similar to the traditional ones, but in reality, besides similarities, there are also a lot of differences and challenges that occur when working with or within a virtual team. We can say that virtual teams are more complex and, due to that, there are a lot of challenges that are encountered and among which: identity, culture and diversity; leadership; communication and motivation; decision-making and conflicts; technology; creativity.

### **Identity, culture, and diversity**

As an imagination exercise, we may consider that we gathered together people from different parts of the world, and we decided that they are a team and that they need to work together in order to achieve some specific goals and objectives. However, in order to do that, in order for those people to really be a “team”, an identity and a culture should be created. Identity is a crucial element for the effective functioning and formation of a virtual team, as it plays “a crucial role in communication because knowledge of those with whom one works and communicates is necessary for understanding and interpreting interaction styles” (Beyerlein, 2008, p.48). Hand in hand with identity goes trust also, something that is developing more

slowly comparing with the traditional teams, due to the fact that within a virtual team there is less visual contact, “data virtualization tools are not meant to transmit social information” (Purvanova, 2018, p.5) and it “takes longer to identify and adjust to the habits, quirks, and skills of team members” (Beyerlein, 2008, p.48).

Starting a virtual team can be sometimes difficult because the members of the team have different experiences, competencies, and skills when it comes to technology. However, if the team is having a good team leader that knows how to handle the differences, then he can turn them into opportunities, as he can create the identity of the team by himself. In order to create the identity and the culture of the team, “most of the literature on virtual teaming suggests getting the team together face-to-face if at all possible, to start the team’s project” (Levi, 2014, p. 55). The best way to create “a common team identity is to increase team members’ confidence in each other and the team as a whole” (Nemiro et al., 2008), to create the feeling of a “common membership” (Langer, 2011, p. 93) and for that should be kept in mind that “people like to associate with groups they think are (or will be) successful and to dissociate from groups they think will fail” (Nemiro et al., 2008).

Another challenge faced by virtual teams is diversity, which cannot be avoided due to the fact that the members of the team are from different regions/countries/continents, have different traditions and cultures, have a different way of thinking or behaving, have diverse beliefs and ways of understanding. In order to cope with diversity and to make the team members understand its benefits, the team leader is the first one that should try to understand how the diversity of its team can help to improve the performance of the team by exploring the human resources (Hong et al., 2017). Understanding the cultural diversity will “enable any leader to more effectively address communication and behavioral differences that arise in virtual teams” (Levi, 2014, p.277), thus leading to the build of trust in the end.

### **Leadership**

Virtual team leaders are working in different conditions, compared with the leaders of the traditional teams, as they often play both the role of a team leader and of a member. However, in order to succeed in that, there are some new competencies that should be taken into consideration when it comes to working from distance, including: “technological proficiency and appropriate use of technology, cross-cultural management skills, ability to coach distant team members, ability to build trust among dispersed team members, networking with others outside the team such as customers or other stakeholders, and remote project management skills” (Beyerlein, 2008, p.50).

When it comes to traditional teams where its members can interact face-to-face, it was confirmed that leadership influences the attitude and behavior at an individual level and at the “team level impacts not only team processes and outcomes but also individual effectiveness” (Liao, 2016, p.3). On the other hand, at the team level, Bell and Kozlowski (2002) underline that leaders of virtual teams do more than developing and shaping team processes, as they also manage and monitor the performance of the team. However, in order to create an effective virtual team, “both leaders and members of virtual teams, even if experienced with face-to-face teams, need enhanced competencies to be effective” (Berry, 2011, p.17).

Being a team leader means that you need to take time and learn the members of the team, what motivates them and which are the similarities and differences among them. Shortly, the topmost leader is the one “that determines the overall culture of the organization” (Jones et al., 2005, p.128) by having the biggest impact of all the virtual teams when it comes to its success or failure in the organization.

### **Communication and motivation**

Communication is very important, no matter the kind of relationship. Basically, communication means that a message is encoded, then it is sent through a certain channel to a certain recipient who is going to decode it (Huguet et al., 2016). However, when it comes to virtual teams, it should be considered a central activity (Levi, 2014), as good communication can stimulate ideas and the creativity of the team members. More than that, communication is very important in order to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization and also in order to adapt “to the changes in the organizational culture, because it encourages adequate participation of workers and the achievement of organizational goals” (Vesna, 2015, p.5).

When it comes to communication in virtual teams, the most used channels are e-mails, skype conferences, videoconferences, instant messaging systems, intranet platforms and other tools specific from a project to another (Meyer et al., 2016, p. 3).

One of the challenges that can influence communication within a virtual team on many levels is represented by language barriers. According to Krawczyk-Bryłka (2016), the language differences correlate with the attributions that are used by the team members in order to access their peers and, on the emotional level, "language barriers intensify isolation and frustration" (Krawczyk-Bryłka, 2016, p.2). Having the necessary language skills is very important for the efficiency of team communication and also due to the fact that it is influencing the trust within the team. According to Child (2001), trust can reduce the cultural distance within the team members, can influence the motivation and also can promote the sharing of information, all of these leading to a good performance and to conflict resolutions (Child, 2001).

### **Decision-making and conflicts**

The decision-making process is very important within a virtual team, being a subject that should be handled very carefully, as otherwise, it can lead to conflicts. Some authors (Nemiro et al., 2008) are stating in their toolkit for collaborating across boundaries that there are some principles that can lead to a good virtual collaboration and to effective decision-making (Nemiro et al., 2008). Due to the fact that the process of decision-making occurs at all levels within an organization and especially within a team, it impacts the value and the quality of the work outcomes (DuBrin, 2013). However, most often, the decision fails due to "poor strategies that result in information and decision alternatives being overlooked" (Cordes, 2016, p.603).

However, both challenges (the decision-making process and conflicts), can be managed through training and interventions at the team level. The examples might include: "training teams to manage conflict more effectively; introducing greater structure into the virtual team environment by adopting frameworks to help guide the decision-making process; engaging in group exercises to develop trust and communication skills; and giving and receiving regular feedback about team performance" (O'Neill et al., 2018, p.3).

### **Technology and creativity**

Virtual teams were created due to the "availability of communication and collaboration technology" (Levi, 2014, p.284). Communication technology can have a lot of meanings, including "a tool for work, a reason for uncertainty, a useful benefit, a challenge, an object of competence, an entity of technical properties, a subject of guidance, a way to express closeness, and a shared space" (Laitinen & Valo, 2018, p.12). Virtual teams have nowadays many tools at their disposal which enable them to get access to unlimited information, but at the same time "paralyzing their ability to take advantage of the wealth of information they possess" (Purvanova, 2018, p.4) due to the information overload.

Anyway, even if creativity means developing new ideas, it also carries risks, because "new ideas may or may not produce the intended positive results" (Çemberci & Civelek, 2018, p.1146). One of the important elements that can help a team to be successful is to "create a powerful vision for the team, and this inherently entails generating new concepts and approaches, which demands creativity and innovation" (Jorgenson, 2018, p.789). In order to cope with risks, team creativity can be promoted by training and structuring, which can help to reduce the "ambiguity and/or uncertainty about the goals and tasks of the team members" (Pei, 2017, p.370).

Virtual teams might have members from all around the globe, which leads to diversity and higher creativity, but due to that they might also encounter "challenges with the convergence of perspectives, thereby leading to potentially worse decisions than face-to-face teams" (Acai et al., 2018, p. 2). In order for a virtual team to achieve high-performance results, creativity is essential, and the team leader is in charge to promote it and to find the best solutions in order to create the effectiveness of the group (Park, 2018).

## Conclusions

As technology advances, virtual teams are increasingly used in today's organizations and businesses and how to lead a team that is virtual become a critical question. This theoretical approach compares the virtual teams with the traditional ones, by underlining the challenges faced and what should be changed in order to create an effective team in a virtual environment. Creating the identity and the culture of a team, handling the diversity and increasing creativity all require extra efforts than in a traditional team. Moreover, leadership is a real challenge, and the study approaches the role of the team leader in both types of teams, the challenges faced by the virtual teams when it comes to the decision-making process and to handle the conflicts, to building trust within the team, to encouraging communication and to building motivation.

As may be observed from the findings, there is still a long way until people will feel comfortable to move to the virtual world. Even if most of the studies researched people consider that traditional teams are more effective, it does not mean that virtual teams cannot reach their best potential in order to be more preferred. As a future direction, research should attempt to conceptualize virtuality by studying the challenges faced by virtual teams and coming up with solutions that can facilitate the transition from a traditional environment to a virtual one.

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