How To Beat The Five Killers Of Virtual Working

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In a previous post I asked the question: does working from home work? The answer from a Chinese company was a resounding yes. Home workers were 13% more productive, happier in their jobs and less likely to leave than their office-bound peers. Virtual working saves money, is better for the environment and gives staff the flexibility they crave, so it’s no wonder that more and more organisations are encouraging it.

Despite these benefits Marissa Meyer has asked Yahoo employees to schlep into the office. And if you take a close look at the evidence the challenges of virtual working threaten to outweigh the benefits. In 2000, Wayne Cascio identified five disadvantages of virtual teams, none of which have been resolved by 12 years of technological advances. Overcoming these obstacles isn’t about high-definition video conferencing; it’s about effective leadership that accounts for the nuances of the virtual environment.

Killer 1: Lack of everyday non-verbal, face to face communication

Virtual teams lack the informal, everyday conversations that co-located employees take for granted – sharing information at the water cooler, solving problems on the coffee run. They’re deprived of non-verbal cues that indicate whether a colleague is on board or annoyed. Virtual employees can go days without contact, leading to feelings of isolation. Virtual employees who feel isolated are less likely to contribute to the team, which hinders innovation and effectiveness.
• Communication quantity is vital. To increase everyday interactions, create smaller interdependent tasks and develop partnerships, giving virtual employees goals to achieve together.

• A strong one-to-one relationship between managers and virtual team members can reduce feelings of isolation. Recent research with 40 global teams showed that when the leader-team member relationship was strong and the leader communicated frequently, the virtual team member was more likely to contribute to team decision making, which increased innovation.

**Killer 2: Lack of social interaction**

For all its perks, working remotely can be draining. Team members miss out on the office banter, the working friendships that get us through a tough Tuesday. It’s difficult for virtual team members to see how their work fits into the big picture, so they become despondent and demotivated.

• Although spontaneous written communication like Instant Messaging can feel forced, effective virtual leaders use it to increase social interactions where time zones allow.

• Building specific ‘social time’ into the team calendar helps, as does starting every meeting with a quick update on everyone’s lives – weekend plans, upcoming holidays.

• Team members should regularly communicate each other’s progress so that everyone can see how their work contributes to the overall team effort.

**Killer 3: Lack of trust**

You can’t see what other people are doing, you don’t get responses immediately and you’re rarely working (or in some cases awake) at the same time. It’s easy to see how virtual working breeds distrust. Trust can be a big problem when only some team members are virtual; office workers fall for ‘shirking from home’ stereotypes, while those at home feel hard done by for missing out on long lunches and cupcakes in the kitchen.

• Awareness of each other’s contributions helps to build trust. As well as setting clear goals and expectations, leaders should make sure that individual roles and responsibilities are publicised within the team. Virtual leaders should create a strategy to communicate each team member’s weekly activities and availability.
• To build the team’s belief that their colleagues are competent, leaders should give constant feedback and showcase each team member’s achievements.

• Research has shown that virtual teams whose leader is Supportive (focused on wellbeing and achieving consensus) have greater trust and increased participation than teams with a Commanding leader (authoritarian, focused on results).

**Killer 4: Cultural clashes**

Miscommunication is rife in virtual teams; even more so when the team spans cultures. A message that seems succinct to a team member in Tel Aviv comes across rude to an employee in Washington, while the American’s would-be polite message (‘thank you in advance...’) seems insipid to their Israeli counterpart.

• While homogeneous teams are more compatible at the beginning, diverse teams are often more productive and creative in the long run. Virtual leaders should recognise and capitalise on team diversity; for instance by building a ‘team profile’ which shares each team member’s experience, expertise and personal information. Leaders can foster cultural understanding by sharing cultural customs within the team.

• To minimize conflict virtual teams should agree on team customs; ground rules for the way in which they interact. Customs align everyone’s expectations – for example, a maximum response time to emails, agreed technology for sharing and updating files, or guidelines on appropriate language in emails.

**Killer 5: Loss of team spirit**

While cohesiveness builds gradually in face-to-face teams, virtual teams often feel like no more than globally dispersed individuals working on the same project. It’s difficult to build an ‘all for one and one for all’ spirit via disjointed emails.

• Virtual leaders are responsible for creating a clear and compelling direction for the team, and making sure each individual is connected to the team vision. Team members’ individual goals should be linked to the team’s overall goal and to each other.

• Team spirit won’t materialize overnight, but is created through thousands of everyday interactions. Leaders need to encourage cohesiveness every time
they communicate – for example, creating a positively loaded team nickname or communicating a success story.

- **Research** shows that virtual teams are more cohesive and effective with shared leadership; when each team member takes some responsibility for the team’s success. To achieve this, devise strategies for virtual team members to monitor, evaluate and regulate their own performance – for example, giving them access to the metrics on which they are evaluated.

- Project wrap-ups are an ideal opportunity to share lessons learned, as well as to celebrate success and share individual accomplishments. Think creatively about how to reward virtual team members – Starbucks vouchers so that everyone brings their free Frappuccino to the next virtual team meeting?

In a business that is losing money and a with a CEO on a turnaround mission, it’s likely that each of these virtual working challenges is a clear and present danger at Yahoo. From that perspective Meyer made the right call.

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