

EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES: Working in a Virtual Environment

UCSD EPSE Student Research
Assignment 2012-13;
Combined Findings

OUTLINE

- The Value of Research
- The Assignment
- Information Received
- Combined Findings
- Discussion

THE VALUE OF RESEARCH

- *More aware* of management challenges, and responses, at your organization
- *Experience* the process of seeking objective information and multiple viewpoints
- *Contribute* to better understanding of common practices across companies and industries

THE ASSIGNMENT

- Understand the challenge
 - Determine what factors most influence the success or failure of virtual work
 - Determine how an organization can best extol, teach, monitor and become proficient at those factors
- Gather information (literature, interviews, survey)
- Look for common themes
- Document findings, present best practices, give personal analysis and recommendations

INFORMATION RECEIVED

- Six team reports
 - 29 researchers
 - 13 science and technology companies
 - 45 interviews
 - 301 survey respondents
 - 45 literature citations
- Swift and professional effort in completing the project and producing coherent and useful reports (five weeks)

FINDINGS

■ Team 1

- Advantages/Disadvantages to Virtual Work
 - wider talent pool – specialized growth and productivity, also potential isolation and distrust
 - relationships/trust – customer, peer experience
 - work/life – potential boon or burden
 - management – high potential, high risk model
- Specific Skills Essential
 - communication – frequent, open, clear
 - proficiency with relevant technical tools
 - self-motivation, take initiative
 - ability to see other's perspective and be flexible
- *"Out of sight, out of mind... death of the virtual workgroup"*

FINDINGS

■ Team 2

- Tested literature via survey and interview, also segmented by phases of a project life cycle
- Results
 - Use of/facility with technology tools is critical
 - Communication skills consistently ranked high
 - written especially at beginning, verbal as progresses
 - face-to-face time makes a big difference
 - Mature processes and procedures ranked high
 - "drumbeat" to meetings and practices
 - Cultural differences not a problem (may be subtle)
 - Also saw interpersonal conflict as not a problem
- Generational/age biases could be explored

FINDINGS

■ Team 3

- Took a remediation approach – what are the risks (70% fail), how to mitigate them
- Factor and action
 - Cooperation, trust
 - promote meaningful face-to-face time
 - approved behavioral norms
 - cross-cultural preparation
 - Consistent understanding, engagement
 - careful group member selection
 - intense management – an every day job
 - Productive tools
 - proactively select tools, forethought and situational
 - often feel constrained or under-supported

FINDINGS

■ Team 4

- Special survey analysis – experienced virtual workers vs. general respondents
 - Same emphasis on communication, organization and planning, technical tools, concerns about cultural sensitivity and the need for some face-to-face contact
 - Experienced group cited how challenging the VWE is in terms of *leadership*, and building *team competence*
 - Experienced group also cited the importance of skills like drive, energy, initiative, and active listening
- Intense management
 - Probably takes more manager time, not less
 - How does your virtual team address communication challenges? – “it relies on the skills of the managers”

FINDINGS

■ Team 5

- Use data gathered to validate or invalidate views about virtual work
 - Only 10% felt a virtual workplace was more productive than a local one
 - Agree that communication is critical, but most said they interact less with the supervisor – and even co-workers – in the virtual environment
 - diminishes accountability
 - erodes trust and commitment
 - Uncertainty about how people were selected, little training or preparation makes progress slow
 - Widespread use of technology tools, not a problem

FINDINGS

■ Team 6

- Looked at important behaviors and actions to support four specific factors of success
 - Fostering Communication (incl. technological)
 - need some periodic voice communication; video not essential
 - need desktop and work file sharing
 - Building Trust
 - personal accountability is the best method of building trust
 - up-front face-to-face meeting is essential
 - Monitoring Progress and Obtaining Consensus
 - heavy emphasis on up-front setting of goal and expectations
 - Managing Performance
 - regular meetings and reviews
- Advantage to teams with a prior history of working together

COMBINED FINDINGS

- Factors That Most Influence Success
 - Ability to communicate well and often
 - Interpersonal skill -- build rapport, deal with conflict, empathize
 - Written and verbal -- clarity and consistency, frequent and regular
 - Technological tools – multiple, to support communication
 - Tendency to take initiative
 - Seek clarity, active listening, anticipate and prepare
 - Employee preparation, training, experience enhances success
 - Very active management
 - Careful selection of members or assignments
 - Common understanding up-front
 - Well-defined and effective processes
 - Regular review, actively address concerns

DISCUSSION

- As a manager, what single action can you take to improve the quality of virtual work in your organization in the coming year?
- Suggest a research topic for next year's EPSE class (e.g., what management issue is your organization struggling with)?