Effective Project Management of Virtual Teams

By Natasha Nuells

In the traditional work structure, co-located teams are assembled to plan and launch projects. As more firms serve national and global markets, the subject matter experts within the company are dispersed in various regions of the country and world. New technologies make having members in different geographic locations no longer a limitation when sourcing for key projects.

The growth of virtual projects is forcing project managers to develop a new skill of managing across borders. The key aspects for leading a successful virtual project team are implementing effective communication plans and encouraging quality teamwork. Through all phases of managing the project, the project manager will need to be mindful of the challenges and success factors related to this unique type of team. Understanding the pitfalls up front can help guide the project manager as they identify potential risks, outline mitigation efforts and develop communication and project plans that provide a cohesive and productive work setting.

Virtual Teams

What is a virtual project team and why would an organization consider building one? “A virtual team can formally be defined as a group of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers assembled using a combination of information and communications technologies for accomplishing an organizational task” (Kuruppuarachchi, 2009, p.20).

In a matrix organization, functional managers from the business units are assigned to plan and execute projects. Virtual teams provide a multitude of benefits for organizations. The primary benefit of assembling a virtual project team is to use subject matter experts within an organization, regardless of location, to efficiently and effectively provide value on key projects. Leadership does not have the old limitation of selecting only the best talent in the area. The organization can also leverage the skills of their employees in remote locations who traditionally could not add value in special projects and demonstrate their abilities. Teammates who don’t work together daily can interact and transfer knowledge on different topics, share best practices and identify cross-organizational opportunities to improve processes.

Another benefit is the traditional work hours are abandoned. “Global projects can use time zone differences to increase the number of productive work hours in a day, and secure scarce resources such as knowledge experts and other specialized resources no matter where they reside” (Anantatmula & Thomas, 2010, p.61). The delivery time on projects can be reduced and allow the organization to bring improvements and new products to the market faster. Lastly, virtual teams reduce costs associated with project travel and real estate as the participants can provide their contributions without having to leave their primary work location.
Successfully Managing Virtual Project Teams

Project managers have new challenges with managing virtual project teams as the team will be compiled with individuals who have never worked together before and ones who span different locations and time zones. The project manager will have to determine the best method to build collaboration & trust as well as produce deliverables. Two key factors to managing the successful virtual project team are: (1) Effective Communication and (2) Quality teamwork/ Knowledge Sharing. It is the primary role of the project manager to ensure that these two characteristics accounted for throughout the entire project from planning to closure.

Success Factor #1: Communication

Communication is a key factor in the success in virtual project teams. “It is important to have a well-organized plan for success” (Kuruppuarachchi, 2009, p.23). The project manager has to understand how to approach a new project with team members from various regions, countries and time zones. New sensitivities like work schedules and meeting times have to be considered more than with traditional work environment. To reduce the impacts of space and time, the project team members need effective communications and appropriate use of the communications tools throughout the project from planning to closure. “The communication plan should have three practical outcomes to improve trust in the project team: creating an environment where team members are comfortable openly discussing conflicts, avoiding rigid structures that are not adaptable, and using communication tools” (Anantatmula & Thomas, 2010, p.61). These tools can be simple as email and conference calls to the new technologies leveraging video and virtual meeting rooms.

The expectation for the type and frequency of the communication should be established up front. “The use of media capable of transferring information via multiple channels also results in increased levels of performance and trust among team members” (Bosch-Sijtsema, Vartianinen & Verburg, 2013, p.70). Most firms have standard communication outlets available for co-located teams that can be repurposed to execute communication within virtual teams. “Problems resulting from miscommunication should be avoided through precise and effective communication; this can be facilitated by more complex and interactive communications technologies that are growing in popularity” (Kuruppuarachchi, 2009, p.31). It will be important to use the technology team members are familiar with as well as leverage any additional technology that simulates interaction for the members, including audio and video conferencing. The project members should to be trained on the channels of communication that will be leveraged throughout the project.

Once there is an understanding of how formal and informal project information will be communicated, the project manager will need to ensure a steady cadence of information on the project and that key stakeholders and participants are involved throughout the project. Setting the expectation on how the project communication plan will be approached throughout the project adds a sense of trust for the project.
team members and stakeholders; the procedures will need to be established early on to ensure the key project team members are aware of changes/updates, in accordance with the communication plan.

Throughout the project, communication and adherence with the communication plan will reduce the delays and misunderstandings among team members. There should be regular opportunities to discuss the activities and issues on the project and work toward resolutions. The project manager has to develop a quality and feedback loop where issues with individuals completing tasks or providing value to the project progress can be reported. It is also critical that project team member activity including member replacements, vacations, transfer of responsibilities (Kuruppuarachchi, 2009, p.31) need to be communicated to ensure proper task completion and coordination of collaboration efforts.

At the close of the project, if the communication was effective the project team can easily close out the log of issues, develop comprehensive lessons learned for future teams and celebrate the success of the project.

Success Factor #2: Teamwork & Knowledge Sharing

Once a communication plan is in place, the next step is to foster a collaborative virtual work setting. Teamwork is vital in developing this type of setting for your team of skilled individuals that are working on this ad hoc project and will need to build valuable working relationships to execute on objectives. The members were assigned because of their expertise and it is the project manager’s responsibility to gather their input and guarantee incorporation in the final product. To achieve this, the project manager must cultivate an environment where the teammates are working together, openly sharing information and cross-checking ideas, processes and approaches to ensure the best results for the final deliverables. Setting the expectations for the project up front and outlining an appropriate communication plan as discussed in success factor number can help to facilitate open communication and collaboration needed for building relationships and teamwork. Effective communication is the foundation to being able to accomplish this factor of quality teamwork. As Ernst, Hoegl, & Prosperio (2007) stated:

Teamwork quality captures the openness, currency, and accuracy of information sharing, the coordination of subtasks, the mutual support between team members, and the use of all team members’ potential, and the effort and cohesion in the team. Therefore, teamwork quality describes the collaborative team process necessary to leverage the increased potential of using dispersed and specialized knowledge resources. This, in turn, supports the team’s ability to more effectively and efficiently complete its task. (p. 159).

There are a few methods that can be used to foster teamwork. (1) Implementing forums and establishing checkpoints for team members to reconvene and share statuses is a great way to encourage collaboration. (2) Recognizing of employees who lead the efforts and promote collaboration can encourage others to follow their actions. (3) Proper execution of the communication plan leads to opportunities to
share formal and informal discussions and close the feedback loop for interested team members. The more effective the project manager is at building a cohesive project team with a good communication plan, the more likely the project and future project will result in success.

Summary

The emergence of virtual projects teams brings a new host of challenges to project managers. There are some similarities to co-located teams; however, the distance between teammates adds an extra layer of concerns. Team members on virtual teams may not have any face-to face-interaction, overlapping schedules or even know one another, so building trust and opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing is paramount. Virtual team project managers need to ensure proper planning and focus in the areas in the two key areas of developing quality teamwork and an effective communication plan to drive trust among the team members, minimize conflict, and execute on the deliverables, regardless of geographic location.

References


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Natasha Nuells is a Lead Internal Business Operations consultant at a large telecommunications company in the United States. She is responsible for quantifying and managing the costs associated with launching large scale projects. Natasha has attained her Project Management Professional (PMP) Certification and leveraged her project management knowledge more than 7 years project/program planning experience in various industries including telecommunications (AT&T), banking and education. Working in global organizations, she has participated in over 20 cross functional, virtual project teams within the past 2 years. Natasha has dual bachelor degrees from The University of Texas at Austin: Bachelor of Liberal Arts (Sociology) and Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing). She is currently a 2014 candidate for a Masters of Business Administration at Texas A&M Commerce. She can be contacted at nn9978@att.com