

## IMMIGRATION INSIGHT

[PREV](#)**VIRTUAL REALITY - CONNECTING ACROSS TIME AND SPACE**[NEXT](#)

**Sophy King (Pro-link Global)** looks at virtual teams, which are becoming increasingly commonplace. What challenges do such teams present – and what advantages can a virtual system give to a global company?

The need for companies to physically move employees from one location to another is the bread and butter of our industry – why would we want to present an alternative solution? Well, what if allowing our colleagues the freedom and flexibility to work from their home locations could benefit not only your staff but also your clients? Flexible working plus a truly global culture at the heart of your organization – what's not to like?

Working virtually presents plenty of challenges that are not faced by companies whose teams are in the same physical location. Creating a cohesive, responsible and communicate team across borders of time and space is not a simple matter. The purpose of this article is to share some of the challenges of working virtually but also some of the advantages we believe virtual teams offer to the global mobility industry.



**Building Cohesion** – As supporters of the England football team know, and as Casey Stengel, a major league baseball manager, has said, “*Finding good players is easy. Getting them to play as a team is another story.*” Socialising is a key part of building an effective team and virtual teams face challenges in this area for obvious reasons. Colleagues are far more likely to share ideas and solutions with each other if they know each other. Feedback is much easier to take from someone you feel you know and who knows you – and constructive criticism can be very destructive when perceived as coming from a stranger. To counter this, good virtual teams make extensive use of web based technology as well as having regular telephone conference calls, for example, every

member of the team can have their own blog on the company's intranet, where they can post pictures, stories, and news. Regular face to face meetings are also important – even if, realistically, these can only happen once a quarter, they can bring great benefits.

**Communicating Effectively** – Communicating clearly and accurately with colleagues when you can't see them is also a challenge. The absence of body language indicators is one problem, and the lack of opportunities to discuss a matter in person, “by the water cooler” can lead to excessive use of email, which is often both unnecessarily time consuming (for both parties) and potentially misleading. When working in a virtual team, it is important for all team members to consciously think about the methods of communication they use and why they use them. Team managers and team leaders should support the development of these skills and provide training. However, for that very reason, this apparent weakness can be turned into strength – recognising communication challenges and therefore providing training on how to overcome them is an important part of success for any company – and virtual organizations are more likely to do this than traditional “brick and mortar” establishments. In the world of global mobility, where clients are also spread across borders and time zones, placing emphasis on internal communication also helps with external communication.

**Cultural Differences** - Another part of the puzzle is the need for understanding and respect for cultural and geographical differences. Kimball Fisher and Mareen Duncan Fisher state in their book, *The Distance Manager*, “Sometimes the biggest chasm of all the distance manager faces is the cultural difference between team members.” From a purely geographical perspective, and as a very basic example, virtual teams have to work hard to ensure that conference calls aren't arranged for a time that's inconvenient for colleagues in another time zone. Virtual teams learn to respect and understand different cultural behaviours and again, although the necessity of doing this can present challenges, the end result - having a culturally respectful team – has an advantage which in today's global marketplace is self-explanatory.

**Using Technology Advantageously** – The tools available for virtual teamwork are staggering, and are improving all the time. Emails have changed the way we do business, and mobile email devices such as the Blackberry mean that employees “on the road” no longer have to worry about catching up with a back of messages at the end of their journey. Shared drives and VPN connections are commonplace for internal document storage, and webinars are now a well-known and popular format, used both internally and for presenting to clients. These resources make virtual teamwork possible but, unless used carefully, can cause a raft of new problems. Virtual teams have to learn when to email and when to pick up the phone. Shared drives have to be kept organized and clean – and backed up. Perhaps most importantly for many virtual teams, workers in home offices have to draw the line between professional time and personal time – they have to know when to switch the Blackberry off. Failure in this area can create an unstable work-life balance, leading to a host of negative repercussions – but success means, again, that you have a team who will use their ability with different communications media for the benefit of your clients. A team used to staying in touch by phone, email, instant message and web based conference is a team that is comfortable with establishing strong relationships long-distance – another must for the global mobility industry.



**Trust and Motivation** – Clearly, when team members are working in separate locations, there has to be a healthy portion of trust from the team leaders. Micro-management and constant supervision just aren't possible. Doug Loewe, of Compuserve, is quoted as saying of virtual teamwork, “The system will fail if the team is made up of people who need constant prodding to get the work done.” On the other hand, the authors of *The Distance Manager* (see above) comment that, “Unfortunately, distance employees tend to believe that no news is bad news. A lack of interaction across distance erodes trust.” I.e. – virtual teams have to be made up of employees who are self starters: Type A personalities who will get the job done – but their managers nonetheless must communicate with them regularly and frequently. Having a team made up of independent, strong minded people is again, surely an advantage – and only becomes a problem if management fails to work on cohesiveness.



**Managing Isolation** –Working alone can be an isolating and lonely experience. Virtual offices simply cannot recreate the social dynamic of an office. Web based meetings and regular, frequent conference calls can go some way towards providing the social interaction many of us need, but regular face-to-face meetings are also a real need. For some people, working from home or alone in a satellite office just isn't a good fit – so before setting up a virtual team, make sure that everyone knows what they're signing up for.

#### **The FACE of Virtual Teamwork: Clear Benefits**

**Flexible** – Virtual teams are flexible and can be made up of employees or contractors with complementary skill sets, across several different cultures and time zones, in order to fit the project needs. In addition, workers who work from home benefit from flexibility: they don't have to stick to traditional office hours, which gives them the advantage of being able to drop the children off to school in the morning or be there at bath time, and gives the company's clients the benefit of having a team of consultants who can make room for after hours or early calls or web conferences.

**Agile** – Virtual teams are in a position to can harness the skills and knowledge of colleagues and associates quickly and efficiently – they are used to working in a virtual network and to utilising technology and their contacts to get the job done.

**Carbon Free** – Virtual team members don't have to travel to an office every day – and there is no brick-and-mortar office to power with heat, light and water.

**Economical** – Using virtual teams means employers have flexibility to assign the right employees to the right tasks – with no waste of time or resources. Added to the fact of having no brick-and-mortar offices, the cost savings are significant, and can be passed on to the client.

### Summary

Perhaps we're putting ourselves out of business by saying this – but we firmly believe that working in a virtual team is not only possible but actually advantageous to a company which seeks to work in a global marketplace. Good behaviour begins at home, and companies which hire independently minded, self starters, who are then trained to communicate across borders and time zones, considering and respecting cultural differences, have a real edge over their competitors.



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