



Challenges for Project Leader in Hybrid Work Culture – An Empirical Study

Ms Namita Gupta, IBM India Pvt Ltd, India
And

Dr Madhu Gupta, Associate Professor, JDMC, University of Delhi, India

Date of Submission: 01-05-2022

Date of Acceptance: 15-05-2022

ABSTRACT

Hybrid work culture is inevitable in future due to technological advances and Covid-19 expedited it. Digital technology provided options to work from remote in collaborative manner and it best suited the pandemic requirement of human distancing. Project Leaders will therefore have to proactively and carefully identify and understand the future challenges that may arise due to hybrid work culture. This paper deliberates over the challenges that future leader will have to face and suggests how they can be prepared to resolve them in best possible way. The primary data is collected through structured questionnaire and it is concluded, that whereas leaders will have to get themselves and team members updated on new tools and technologies, they will also have to train the team including themselves with soft-skills. Clarity of goals, use of appropriate technology, cautiously set policies, good communication systems and interactive virtual meetings can bring out well directed collective effort that can make the team outperform.

KEYWORDS: Hybrid work culture, Leadership, Project leader, Teamwork, Telecommuting, Virtual teams.

I. INTRODUCTION

A project leader is a professional who leads others and ensures that a project is completed. Every project relies on teamwork which is defined as a group's collaborative effort to achieve a common goal or complete a task in the most efficient manner. Employee teamwork enables the entire workforce to break down difficult projects into smaller, more manageable pieces, allowing individuals to collaborate to complete the project more quickly and efficiently. It also enables effective work allocation, for example, by assigning work based on the individual's skills and capabilities. In a nutshell, teams improve work efficiency by increasing

productivity, lowering costs, increasing profits, and a variety of other methods. This implies that project leadership is also, and must be, team leadership. The project manager engages the team by motivating them, attending to their needs, and fostering a pleasant and productive work environment.

Leading a team of skilled individuals is never easy. Every individual comes with his/her own background, personality and specialty. Taking out best from individuals and make them work in coherent way for the team; complementing and supporting each other; requires a lot of soft skill capabilities as well as emotional intelligence.

Hybrid work culture is inevitable in future due to technological advances and Covid-19 expedited it. Digital technology provided options to work from remote in collaborative manner and it best suited the pandemic requirement of human distancing. Once experienced this culture, various benefits are seen by employers as well as employees and hence we can assume hybrid work culture is here to stay. Project Leaders will therefore have to proactively and carefully identify and understand the future challenges that may arise due to hybrid work culture. The organization culture, policies and vision have great impact on leadership strategies. With changing environment and work culture; the channels of communication, collaborations, tools of work execution and management have changed tremendously and incorporate latest digital and on-line technologies. Leading a team of persons in different working conditions, persons who have never met each other personally, persons differently trained in using modern digital techniques are some of the few challenges that have emerged due to hybrid work culture. This paper deliberates over the challenges that future leader will have to face and suggests how they can be prepared to resolve them in best possible way.



II. OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this paper is to determine the challenges that a project leader will face in a hybrid work culture and to suggest how they can be prepared to resolve them in best possible way.

III. METHODOLOGY

Both primary as well as secondary sources of information were used for the study. The primary data is collected through structured questionnaire in which 54 respondents contributed, 30% from non-IT sector and 70% from IT sector. Secondary data was collected with the help of published sources like various authorities' publications, blogs, documents, and reports on the subject.

MANAGING VIRTUAL TEAMS

Fayol (1949) defines management in terms of the well-known five functions – planning, organizing, commanding (leading, in modern parlance), coordinating and controlling. As per Fayol, to manage is "... to forecast and plan, to organize, to command, to co-ordinate and to control". (Fayol, 1949). A virtual team (also known as a geographically dispersed team, distributed team, or remote team) is a group of people who collaborate from different geographical locations using communication technology such as email, instant messaging, and video or voice conferencing services. (Wikipedia) Powell, Piccoli and Ives (2004) define virtual teams as "groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks." (Anne Powell, Winter Vol. 35,) . Even before COVID-19 pushed enterprises all over the world to start working

remotely, virtual teams were becoming the new norm. Everyone has embraced these teams, which are made up of people from various geographical regions, from small startups to multinational mega-corporations. (O'Bannon, 2014). Between 2012 and 2016, the proportion of people working online increased from 39% to 43%. (ADAM HICKMAN, 2020). These figures have steadily risen as businesses increasingly recognise the benefits of remote labour, which include lower overhead costs such as electricity, Wi-Fi, refreshments, other utilities, and rent for large offices. There are no geographical restrictions, and more talented individuals can be hired for the team. Companies that have employees spread across multiple time zones can operate around the clock, ensuring uninterrupted productivity and catering to all customers worldwide. (Gupta, Work from Remote - An overview of Cost and Performance Implications, 2021).

In virtual teams also project leaders must do all managerial work. They plan their work, ensure that the necessary resources (financial, material, and human) are available to them, lead and motivate them, harmonize their activities, and evaluate the results of their efforts and modify

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Though, remote workers can help businesses grow faster and provide better customer service, the special characteristics of virtual team i.e., geographically dispersed teammates, mediated by technology, structurally dynamic, low levels of intra-organizational contact etc. present own set of challenges to project leaders.



Figure 1: challenges and barriers in virtual teams



In our survey most of the respondents (69%) pointed out that ineffective communication is the major challenge which a project leader will have to face in Hybrid work culture. The success of any team is dependent on effective communication. Even so, clear and efficient team communication can be hampered when team members come from different time zones and haven't gotten to know each other personally. Delayed responses are becoming more common, and nonverbal communication, such as visual communication and visual cues, is disappearing. (Brosix, 2020).

Another major challenge cited by many of the respondents (59%) is social isolation of employees. Employees in hybrid mode miss the informal social connections that come with working in an office setting. Extraverts are thought to be more isolated in the short term, particularly if they do not have opportunities to connect with others in their remote work setting. Isolation can make any employee feel less "belonging" to their company over time, and it may even increase the desire to leave. (Brewster).

Inadequate information access is another barrier in hybrid work culture as per 46% of the respondents in our survey. Remote workers are frequently irritated by the extra time and effort required to obtain information from teammates or co-workers. Even getting answers to simple questions appears to be a major challenge for a remote employee. This proclivity extends beyond task-related work to interpersonal issues that may arise between teammates who are geographically separated.

Maintaining work life balance and distractions from work is another significant barrier cited by 42% of the respondents that affects remote employees' performance. This can be due to email, social media, and smartphones, as well as noise from children and other family members, as well as

noisy neighbours, flatmates, and neighbourhoods. Many employees may not have enough working space and may be forced to share space and devices at home with others. Employees are also bothered by time differences and an increase in waiting times for each other's work to be completed or for each other's availability when working remotely. (Gupta, Managing Distractions affecting Employees' Productivity while working from home, 2021).

Around 40% of the respondents cited lack of face-to-face supervision as another major concern among both managers and employees while working in hybrid mode. Managers are concerned that their employees will not work as hard or as efficiently as they should, and many employees have complained about a lack of managerial support and communication. Employees believe that their remote managers are unable to understand their requirements and, as a result, are neither supportive nor helpful in completing their projects.

Attrition (30%), Data Protection & Privacy (30%), less Productivity (22%) and More Cultural gaps (19%) are some of the other barriers cited by the respondents.

MANAGING HYBRID TEAM CHALLENGES

As per the respondents in our survey, to successfully manage a Hybrid Team, the main activities required to manage the challenges of hybrid team on part of project leaders are: Constructive communication (78%), Effective leadership (65%), Right technology (61%), Virtual team building activities (50%), Optimal delivery model (44%) and Training (44%). Other activities helpful in meeting the challenges are Work life counselling and interventions (39%), Continuous feedback (37%), Reward & recognitions programme (32%), Appreciations (29%), Mentorship program for the team (22%) and Frequent townhalls by senior managements (19%).

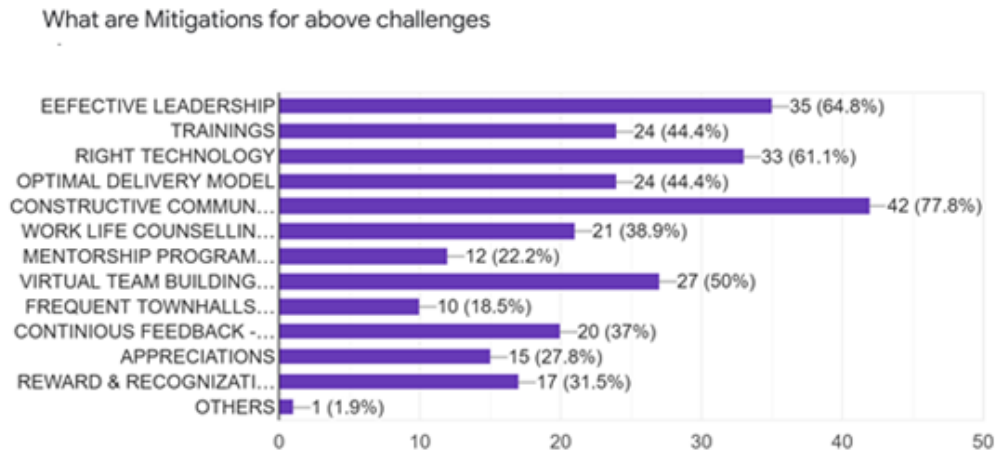


Figure 2: managing hybrid team challenges

These managing activities can be grouped into three main categories: Effective leadership, Optimum delivery models and Right Technology.

I. EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Leading a team that is physically located in a Hybrid workplace, i.e., some employees in the office and some remote, will necessitate a leader to ensure the team is able to perform at its best.

a) Building the right team

Hiring (or developing) the right employees to work in virtual teams, dividing them into appropriately sized teams, and assigning them appropriate roles is critical in managing the challenges of remote teamwork. (ferrazzi, 2014)

Right Team: The leader's first responsibility is to identify qualified individuals who can work independently and flexibly. Successful virtual team members should have a high level of emotional intelligence, the capacity to work autonomously, excellent communication skills, and the resilience to deal with the inevitable mess. It is equally critical in global groupings to be aware of and sensitive to various cultures. In remote work cultures, it is possible to hire people from all over the world, and management may prefer to do so in order to obtain higher skills and, in certain cases, lower costs. As a result, it may be difficult to determine whether a person will be able to fit into the team while building it.

Second, the process of obtaining sufficient manpower necessitates conducting interviews. In addition to the skills required for the job, the interviewer must assess an individual's attitude and personality in light of the job's requirements. During a face-to-face interview, both verbal and nonverbal communication can be monitored. Some practical

tests could also be taken on the spot. When interviews are performed digitally, however, it is difficult to see the interviewee's behaviour. Trusting the interviewee is also a problem because he may be referring to some information or relying on the assistance of another person to answer the questions.

Right size: Because remote work allows for part-time and contract employees, the team size necessary currently may be different. Virtual teams should be smaller, preferably less than ten persons, to be more productive. This is because team members will put in less effort if they are not held accountable for their production, and maintaining inclusive communication in a larger virtual team can be difficult.

Right roles: Assigning responsibilities effectively amongst teammates based on their knowledge and expertise boosts efficiency. Assigning project roles allows the leader to know who is in charge of which task and when that specific portion of the project is expected to reach completion.

b) The Right Leadership for effective Teamwork

Effective managers build trust and relationships among teams, establish clear goals and guidelines, reduce multitasking during team calls, promote constructive communication, and implement appropriate technology.

Building relationships and creating trust amongst teammates: The foundation for good teamwork is the development of trust and the formation of relationships. Face-to-face contact is preferable to virtual communication because co-workers/teammates in the same office usually discuss their personal lives, whereas virtual teammates rarely do. Leaders should encourage



team members to talk about their histories, what they hope to contribute to the group, and how they prefer to work in virtual teams. When communicating later by e-mail, phone, or text messaging, employees can form mental impressions of one another. Relationship building should be a constant effort. Managers should offer each employee a few minutes at the start of conference calls to discuss his or her recent professional accomplishment or personal news to combat the isolation that can arise when employees do not physically work together. (Bakken, 2018).

Setting clear goals and guidelines: Because employees operate remotely from different locations, coordination within virtual teams is difficult. Leaders must align the goals, roles, and responsibilities of their teams. In virtual teams, it's vital to recognize the importance of having a shared purpose or vision, as well as defining the roles and responsibilities in terms of individual team members' wants and goals. Work should be divided into tiny subgroups and simplified. They should be told not just what their aims and roles are, but also what their task and work process entails, as well as who is responsible for what and when. On a regular basis, leaders should assess how things are going and make any necessary adjustments or training.

c) Accessible and Available

In a hybrid work culture, leaders must be willing to make themselves accessible and available to their team members. Leaders must be aware of their remote employees' emotional states and provide support. Everyone needs to know that their leaders, no matter where they are, are always willing to support and assist them.

II. OPTIMAL DELIVERY MODELS

Setting up an optimal delivery model is critical for getting the most out of the team's productivity. This will entail establishing cadences, such as a 15-minute scrum call at a time that is common to all time zones, methods of remote status reporting, methods of team member handover or handshake, and modes of communication. This will also involve team building or fun activities to bring the team together socially, such as online games or coffee chats, among other things. The delivery strategy relies heavily on constructive communication.

Constructive communication: Teamwork necessitates constructive communication among team members, and the team leader must guarantee that this occurs. Maintaining distance and virtual encounters remove many connected acts of

communication, such as body language and facial expression, necessitating the development of various strategies to fill these gaps. During team calls, employees usually do other tasks, such as surfing the web or going to the restroom. Multitasking during calls should not be allowed since virtual collaboration requires everyone to be mentally present and engaged. In virtual meetings, teammates should be encouraged to express their opinions on a regular basis and to turn on the video, which completely precludes the possibility of multitasking. A charter must be written outlining the expectations of virtual meeting participants, such as limiting background noise and side conversations, speaking clearly and at a moderate pace, listening attentively and not dominating the conversation, and so on. In specific instances, the charter should also indicate whether to use specific communication modes, for as whether to respond by email vs. calling vs. creating and sharing a document.

The one-on-one performance management and coaching interactions between leaders and their team members are critical to any team's success. Not only should these interactions be a regular part of the virtual team's routine to keep members engaged to the vision and highlight their role in overall teamwork, but they should also be used to verify status and provide feedback.

For optimal communication, virtual teammates should meet in person on a regular basis. This is especially useful when a project begins, when a new team member joins, and when major milestones or concerns arise.

III. RIGHT TECHNOLOGY

Because of developments in collaboration tools such as shared workspaces and multi-point video conferencing, virtual teaming has become easier. Choosing the correct technology does not always imply selecting the most up-to-date or feature-rich options. To increase efficiency, the company must implement relatively basic systems for direct calls, conference calls, text messages, and participation in virtual team rooms and discussion forums. It's crucial not to overlook the importance of data security, which necessitates the selection of the appropriate technology. The team will need the necessary technology and software to perform in addition to virtual collaboration tools. Many businesses, for example, budget for Capex costs such as chairs, tables, and devices, as well as Opex costs like as broadband and phone calls. It also calls for collaborative software solutions like Mural or Trello, where team members may get together and collaborate on ideation, planning, and other tasks.



IV. CONCLUSION

Hybrid teams, which combine remote workers with those who are physically present in the office, can help firms cut expenses, reduce attrition, boost productivity, and become more adaptable in the face of adversity. This new structure, on the other hand, presents a new set of obstacles for managers who were previously trained in the old workplace. Geographic distance makes it harder for dispersed coworkers to connect and collaborate. Virtual work groups, on the other hand, will outperform teams with shared office space if they are properly managed, with a robust communication system, clear goals, appropriate technology, fantastic interactive meetings, and exploiting team members' individual and collective skills.

REFERENCES

- [1]. ADAM HICKMAN, P. A. (2020, January 24). Is Working Remotely Effective? Gallup .
- [2]. Anne Powell, G. P. (Winter Vol. 35., issue 1, 2004). Virtual teams: a review of current literature and directions for future research. . The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems - Winter.
- [3]. Bakken, R. (2018, August 23). Challenges to Managing Virtual Teams and How to Overcome Them. Professional Development.
- [4]. Brewster, C. (n.d.). The 11 Biggest Challenges of Working Remotely and How to Overthrow Them. Trio.
- [5]. Brosix. (2020, June 11). Virtual Team Challenges and Proven Ways to Solve Them. Brosix.
- [6]. Fayol, H. (1949). General and Industrial Management. London: Pitman.
- [7]. Ferrazzi, K. (2014). Getting Virtual Teams Right. Harvard Business Review.
- [8]. Gupta, M. (2021). Managing Distractions affecting Employees' Productivity while working from home. Journal of Oriental Research Madras, 392-398.
- [9]. Gupta, M. (2021). Work from Remote - An overview of Cost and Performance Implications. IJARCMSS, 187-192.
- [10]. O'Bannon, I. M. (2014, September 4). Small Business Hiring Up Across U.S. for First Time in 2014. CPA Practice Advisor.
- [11]. Wikipedia. (n.d.). the free encyclopedia. Wikipedia, .