

YOU DON'T KNOW ME BUT...

Enhancing the performance of virtual and co-located teams



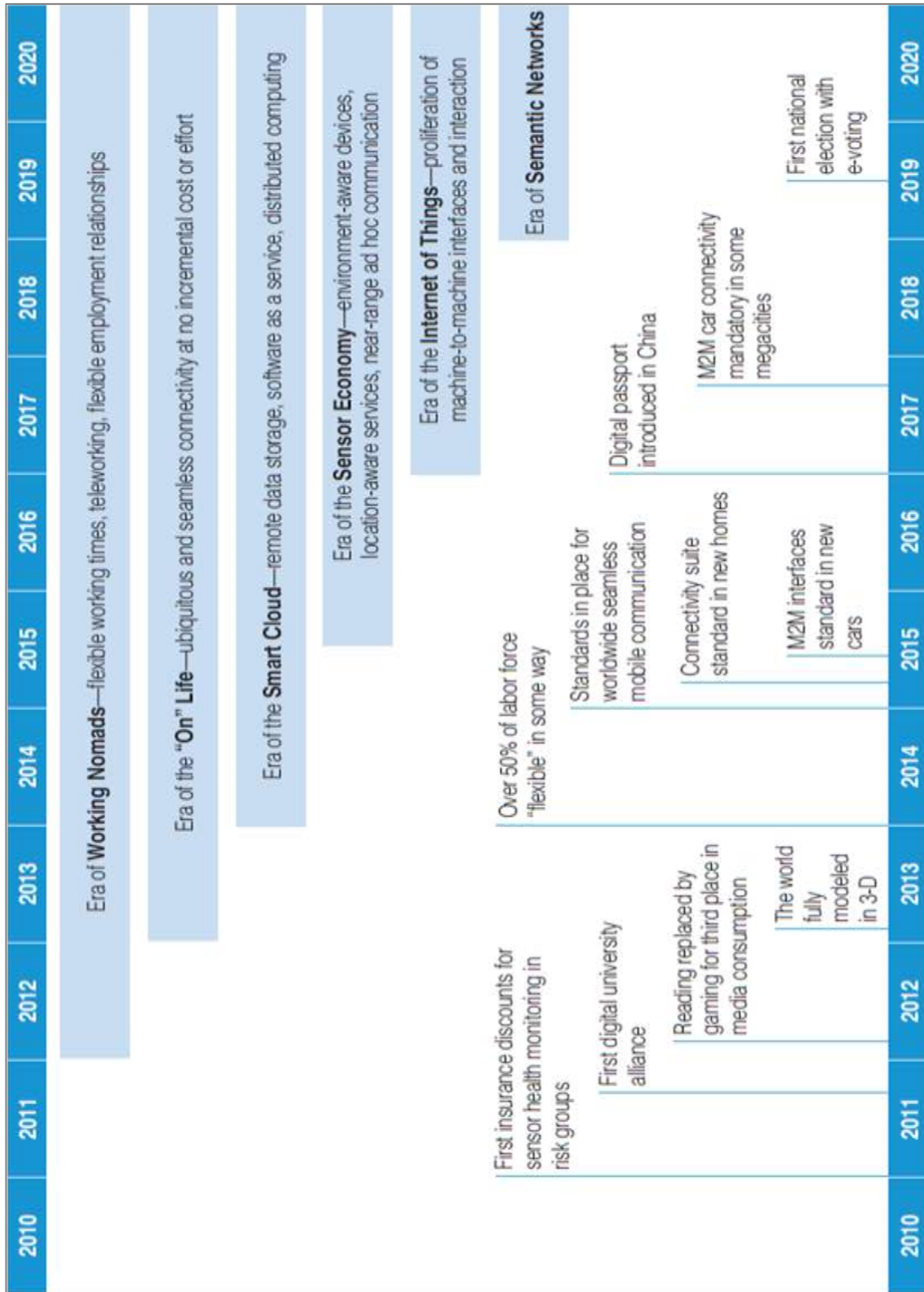
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Timeline of events for the coming decade

Source: Booz & Company, 2010



Executive summary

Workplace agility initiatives involve rethinking the very nature of work and almost without exception, this leads to an increasingly distributed workforce

As workplace agility becomes an irresistible forceⁱ – be it the perennial pressures to reduce infrastructure costs, the rapidly changing employee aspirations, or market dynamics – forward-looking organisations are using these challenges as a catalyst to launch integrated thinking towards creating fitter, more responsive working environments.

These initiatives involve rethinking the very nature of work and almost without exception, this leads to an increasingly distributed workforce.

Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of team dynamics and especially of virtual teaming is critical to maintain organisational effectiveness.



Teaming has often been an issue for individuals, as well as for people who are trying to get more out of their workforce. By understanding the advantages and disadvantages of virtual teams and identifying desired team outcomes, companies can begin to strengthen selected capabilities to build virtual teams that are more cohesive and productive.

The goal of optimising virtual teams is to discover and adopt methods, tools, and concepts that support predictable outcomes as they are most needed by the team. Consider these seven steps to help accomplish this:

1. Understand your team and its characteristics.
2. Appreciate the problems virtual teams face.
3. Consider potential team outcomes and choose those most critical to your success.
4. Recognise the crucial capabilities that influence the success of teams.
5. Identify the readily available resources to assist your team.
6. Choose the attributes and technologies that best support your specific outcomes
7. Perform the specific initiatives demanded by your action plan.

Booz & Co have identified a series of 'trigger eras' over the coming decade that will drive fundamental change across all organisations – creating substantial opportunities and threats. By the close of 2011, they project the emergence of Working Nomads – defined as flexible working times, tele-working, flexible employment relationships. They also project that, by 2013, over 50% of labour force will be 'flexible'



What's a team?

Start by clarifying what a team is.

A *team* is a group of people with common interests and at least one common goal. Usually, there exists across the team a substantial amount of *social capital* – defined by Robert Putnamⁱⁱ as mutual commitments based on "*social networks (who people know) and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other ('norms of reciprocity')*".

A team requires real collaboration, along with sharing work and responsibilities.

Yet, other groups of people without these characteristics may also be described as teams. For example, task forces, workgroups, and formal departments are all often called teams. And, sometimes they really are.

Frequently however, those groups are more like a gearbox, where someone has put together a set of skills and just expects it thereafter to produce more than the sum of its parts.



Figure 1 - all too often, groups are more like a gearbox, where someone has thrown together a set of skills and just expects it to produce more than the sum of its parts

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Luckily, people do have a natural tendency to work socially and team, consequently they can overcome some of the limits of that expectation.

Other affiliations are also often called teams, such as *communities*. Communities can be very large and may not share common goals, but they may feature quite a bit of social capital.

In practice, the 'ideal' team probably does not exist, but hybrids often have aspects of communities, task forces, departments, and other kinds of groups. Teams are never simple, and teaming is never easy.



Advantages and disadvantages of virtual teams

Virtual teams exhibit all the confusion and organisational predicaments of face-to-face teams, plus they bring their own set of concerns

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One might ask, why even bother with virtual teams? Partly, it is because we *can*. We have the tools now that make it possible to work with each other at a distance. And, partly because we *must*.

Real talent – an irreducible competitive advantage – is rare and companies have to get it where they can.

In fact, it's not simply that real talent is so much generically rare as that it's not readily available in the traditional recruitment markets.

As we emerge from the combined crisis of the financial services collapse and the worst economic recession for more than seventy years, a new economic landscape has emerged.

Employers are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain the right talent, especially in the younger generations. However, talent is abundant in new markets. A hugely increased global workforce – and the rising skills and aspirations of the major countriesⁱⁱⁱ driving the new global economy mean that organisations continually need to be driving their workplaces up the value chain.

Nowadays, people who can 'do the job' may choose to live where the lifestyle is better, congestion is less, there is a magnificent view, or their family commitments balance.





Figure 2 - in a virtual setting, it can be harder to gain consensus from others and location experts can prove increasingly time-consuming

Virtual teams let managers pull some of these people into jobs whom they might not be able to recruit otherwise.

Virtual teams offer other benefits for businesses. Cost avoidance frequently tops the list because of flexibility in recruiting. In addition, work can continue around the clock if people are staged in different geographies, handing off work so that a subset of the team is busy while other employees are resting.

Moreover, another compelling reason to establish virtual teams in an organisation – particularly a multi-location organisation – is the difficulty to carry out change across the enterprise.

A virtual team is likely to have a membership that is diverse – in different places and different organisations. As a result, managers can use the team as an opportunity to plant the seeds of change within the company, resulting in a greater swiftness and fluency of change.

Now, we all know about the disadvantages of virtual teams. For instance, in a live conference call,

nobody can see the faces of their colleagues, it is not possible to know how many attendees might be bored, eating lunch, confused, or how many are hanging on every word.

We always hope it is mostly the latter, but you simply never know. Many attendees probably handle e-mail or surf the Web, which may be acceptable, depending on the call topic and disposition of the chairperson.

In a virtual setting, it can be harder to gain consensus from others and locating experts can prove increasingly time-consuming. Plus, it is tough for people to retain a team focus and for the team to be recognised as a powerful entity.

Trust is clearly important to team effectiveness, yet it is hard to establish over the phone.

Nevertheless, people have even fallen in love and married based on correspondence, so it's not impossible, it just requires more focus in a virtual environment.



How to gain a reputation of power is an old conundrum – typically, a lack of face time with executives translates to enjoying less power in the organisation!

The most commonly cited challenge is establishing trust. We are all used to building trust in a face-to-face way.

Trust is clearly important to team effectiveness, yet it is hard to establish over the phone. Nevertheless, people have even fallen in love and married based on correspondence, so it's not impossible, but it just requires more focus in a virtual environment.

A lack of social cues is detrimental as well, because someone on a telephone call cannot tell if others are looking away, if they are confused, or if they are mumbling to each other. Real connection is harder since all those valuable cues are missing.

In addition, differences in culture can create other concerns. For face-to-face meetings, whether people are from different regions or even dissimilar business areas within the organisation; for example; an engineer trying to talk to a marketing person – there is a high likelihood of disconnect. However, in cyberspace, those disconnects might not be as visible until they become real conflict. Which brings up another question: how do you

resolve the conflict? It can be very tough when you are physically separated.

When people are sensitive or emotional, it is far more troublesome than being face-to-face, where it is obvious how upset they are and whether any progress is being achieved.

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In addition, knowing whether someone is available to participate can be unclear. Distance can result in people who have difficulty contributing, especially if they are connected only by telephone while most of the other team members are in a room together – those far away can be more easily forgotten. Unfortunately, this list of challenges associated with being 'virtual' could easily be doubled.

However, the question is;

"Having looked at potential advantages and disadvantages, what can an organisation do about it?"

"How can they make improvements?"



Here is a surprising fact

"organisations don't really care about teams".

They care a great deal about what teams produce, but if an individual can produce the same outputs as a team, then the organisation is just fine with that

How virtual?

First, take a close look at the team.

You may already have a sense of where you are – maybe you recognise that your teams are a hybrid between a task force and a genuine, ideal team, but how *virtual* is your team?



To answer this, consider numerous factors beyond the location of team members. For instance, different cultures amplify 'virtuality' and present a greater obstacle.

It is especially tough if the team is *never* able to hold face-to-face meetings. Certain organisations manage to hold in-person, kick-off meetings that start each New Year; others do not.

Another consideration is whether social capital^{iv} has already built up within the organisation – has the group ever bonded at a basic level –

or do they remain strangers to each other?

The greater the past interaction, the better the team can leverage that background. If many have never met, the greater the challenge the team will face. Finally, there's no getting away from the fact that size matters – the size of the team can make a big difference – certainly, with more than twenty people, building group coherence becomes infinitely more complicated.

Team outcomes

When you have grasped a sense of the kind of team you have plus have a better feel for potential hurdles – here is a surprising fact:

"organisations don't really care about teams"

They care a great deal about what teams produce, but if an individual can produce the same outputs as a team, then the organisation is just fine with that.

As it turns out, though, a team can produce certain results that an individual cannot. Different kinds of teams often produce different outputs in better ways. This is key – it's critical when creating or enabling a virtual team to focus on what is essential to make the team better.

It's impossible to do everything – many activities that would traditionally be done as team-building exercises are just not going to be effective for a virtual team.



So first, perform triage by considering this list of outcomes. Do your teams...

1. Offer broader reach to secure a more complete set of inputs,
2. Extend the range of interpretations,
3. Capitalise on talents & skills,
4. Distribute work load,
5. Provide reactions, testing and evaluation for more robust work products and solutions,
6. Reach out more broadly to influence and leverage capabilities and knowledge,
7. Provide mutual support.

Shown above in red - certain outcomes offer bigger advantages in a virtual team environment than a traditional one. These are the specific team results that the organisation cares about.

One caveat: even though these describe outcomes that a business cares about, an individual may be more concerned with other outcomes.

Research has shown that individuals place greater importance on the people they are able to work with - if they get to work with friends that can make a difference in how they perceive the value of the team.



Research^v has shown that individuals place greater importance on the people they are able to work with - if they get to work with friends that can make a difference in how they perceive the value of the team.

The business probably does not give weight to that. Likewise, for factors such as career advancement, that may indirectly affect the corporation but directly affects individuals.

Back to the outcomes list: One reason we form teams is to *offer broader reach to secure a more complete set of inputs*, which can happen when a team tries to represent different groups. Diversity is one of many criteria often used when forming a team. Even if a team is bubbling up out of the community as a grassroots effort, people often look around to see if they have the right sort of representation within the membership.

A team can *extend the range of interpretations*, which again points to the diversity of the team and may encompass recognising different and compelling perspectives.

When studying emerging technology, for example, it is very interesting to hear an industry expert talk about



the capability of the technology versus what a technologist says about it. You can get a different point of view and a different reaction.

Which brings up the next point; teams *capitalise on talents and skills*. This is one of the most obvious advantages with a team. When you need a programmer, you need a programmer. When you need a marketer, you need a marketer. If you try to fake it, things are not likely to work out well. People have different talents, and they bring them along to a team.

Teams can *distribute workloads*. A common example is the 24-hour clock usage, handing off work from one geography to the other. However, it also can happen when a person says, *"Hey, I've got some availability. I'm going to get in there and get something done."* Such efforts will push the work forward even though the task was originally assigned to somebody else.

Teams can *provide reactions*. Ever noticed that a team usually writes comedies? The reason is simply because when you tell a joke and somebody laughs, you immediately realise it may be a successful joke. If that person does not laugh, it probably isn't funny. They really need the feedback and reactions of other people to be successful. Beta *testing* – or testing in different environments – is an important part of this.

The next point on the list is *influence*. This has to do with both selling and being able to access different capabilities within the organisation.

Concluding our list is a very important outcome: teams provide *mutual support*. If a team is doing something that's 'delicate', the team has to provide a protective environment for the early work. Being out in the open among other people may discourage the team very early on. Instead, the people with common goals will say, *"Okay, you've got ten percent of it here, and that's good progress so far. So, let's see if together we can get to twenty percent and we'll keep moving forward."*

For best results, people should choose no more than two of these outcomes as the main reasons why their team exists. This is always tough to do; nobody wants to make the choice. Everybody wants to achieve them all since they are all good objectives. However, if you are going to focus and target your actions to create a more effective team, you must be selective. After that, start a gap analysis, which is an essential capability for successful virtual teaming.

Finally, take action. It is vital to invest in the people, processes, and technology to close those gaps – because if you just diagnose without prescribing and taking the medicine, you will never be better off.



Finding routes to better virtual teams

Now, having gained a sense of your team and better understanding of the desired outcomes, you can start to assess the resources and capabilities at hand.

This assessment is aimed at enhancing, in a prioritised way, one or more of the following important capabilities:

1. Have skilled people in the team,
2. Have 'sensors' to find the right people and information,
3. Technologies that allow the team to reach out for input,
4. Taxonomies to allow the team to filter & structure information,
5. Empower both individuals and teams,
6. Access tools and techniques for analysis,
7. Access tools and techniques for synthesis,
8. Mentoring for the team,
9. Facilitate communication and participation,
10. Build significant social capital,
11. Negotiate and document the project itinerary,
12. Record and monitor project progress to keep it visible,
13. Facilitate initiative among the team members,
14. Attain sufficient resources,

15. Facilitate error correction,
16. Develop 'sensors' to find the right people to influence,
17. Technologies that allow the team to influence and maximise capabilities and knowledge,
18. Help team members gain influence,
19. Generate collateral material.

For instance, to obtain a more complete set of inputs, assess the skills of people among your team to make sure all the critical skills are available – if not, acquiring requisite skills becomes an action item.



Also, recognise social networking (across the organisation rather than the much-hyped Facebook, et al) as a team resource – an example being when consulting 'the grapevine' for background on a specific topic before attending customer meetings.

That's where strong social networking becomes vital – by amplifying weak signals and providing access to fresh information through either peers or regular communication, such as newsletters or web conferences



In particular, it is necessary to focus on the newest information. That's where strong social networking becomes vital – by amplifying weak signals and providing access to fresh information through either peers or regular communication, such as newsletters or Web conferences.

If your group is not 'in the loop', consider how to address this need. How can you be the eyes and ears of the organisation, which is the outcome a corporation expects?

Attributes and technologies

To improve your abilities to deliver on team goals, there are many interventions to consider. These fall into two main categories: attributes and technologies.

Attributes are related to rules and culture – how the team defines itself and the power the team can exercise.

There is, however, no technology that is a *cure* for a team. It does not work to go out, buy instant messaging software, and assume "OK, from now on my team is going to work just fine".

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If you get technology right it will simply make things more fun!

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Any of these interventions are embedded within the power of the organisation. They only become effective when combined with the right rules, the right expectations, the right training, and all the other elements that make using the tool something that is natural, expected, and obviously beneficial to the people within the team.

One questionable approach is to mandate the use of a tool and tell people, "Just get on with it, we've already provided what you need."

That really does not work, particularly with talented people who may comply, but it will be defiant compliance. Everyone has probably experienced that type of reaction on occasion. Such resistance commonly creates considerable distraction and more often than not, it only adds to the tension and anxiety as team members focus on analysing the tools.



Taking action to improve teams

Time to formalise an action plan.

The following actions have been applied by countless other teams going through this thought process.

The most obvious are not listed here since they are probably ideas that would pop into your mind first as you determine how to work toward a specific outcome. Perhaps a little less obvious, these actions might be useful:

- Take time to assess your team (consider attitude, talents and goals),
- If large, select a core team,
- Provide access to decision-makers,
- Set expectations regarding applications, especially chat,
- Make sure all are comfortable with the tools,
- Keep it simple,
- Equalise where possible – let distant members chair meetings,
- Go 'non-synchronous' (exchange information, but not in real-time) to accommodate non-English speaking members,
- Have backup methods,
- Use a shared workflow tool,
- Systematically build social capital,
- Invest in face-to-face contact whenever possible,

- Create a 'sensitive' forum,
- Enlist facilitators,
- Find a means to establish presence.

Make sure 'webinars' (seminars conducted real-time via the Internet) are *two-handed* – managed not by only one expert speaker, but also a second person who can assist attendees wanting to ask questions and manage connectivity or other technical complications.

Let us look at each of these in more detail.

First, take the time to assess your team; find out what capabilities they have and what their attitudes are. It is not good to have people on the team who are there grudgingly – or worse, not to realise when that's the case. Make sure that people understand the common goal, have a chance to discuss it among themselves and then let it become their goal. These are all crucial.



For a large team, it can make a huge difference to select a core team. Our research^{vi} indicates using about seven people typically gives good results – each of whom will be very active and hold overall responsibility.



Each could also be responsible for a sub-team. It is unwieldy when many more than seven people are running the show, so shrink it down to a core team. This does not mean other people are lesser members. Others may be huge contributors, by designating a core team it creates a way to manage more effectively.

There is nothing more frustrating than working on a virtual team and not being able to make progress because you are waiting for an answer.

Another tip is to provide access to decision-makers. There is nothing more frustrating than working on a virtual team and not being able to make progress because you are waiting for an answer.

If the decision-maker is amenable to it, have him or her available by instant messaging, at specific hours, on a regular basis.

This way, everyone knows, *"I can get access at that time. Despite their obligations to attend meetings, be on the phone or involved in another team, at least I can get a quick answer from decision-makers on whether I can proceed"*.

Setting expectations

Another action is to set expectations with regard to supporting applications, especially chat. If everybody needs to be available, let them know that it has to happen.

Try very hard to make people comfortable with these technologies. A commonly repeated situation is the mandated use of a 'wonderful' tool that half the group really loves and with which the other half has never become comfortable. Look for workarounds; for instance, certain people do not like the real-time chat because they are less proficient with spelling or the English language in general. Make adjustments for that.

Consider using a non-synchronous tool for non-English speakers, because it gives them a chance – through something like a newsgroup format – to rewrite their document before posting it. If they need help with writing or more time to compose their thoughts, this approach allows them to participate and not lose face. You have to respect the dignity of the people within the team.

It is possible that only a few people will be distant while most of the people in the group are face-to-face. Having a distant person chair, your conference call allows that person to decide when others speak and prevents others from forgetting those who are remote.



Effective remedies



Try this highly effective, proven remedy: have you ever noticed that BBC News can provide viewers a real sense of their various reporters by just displaying the reporter's picture on the screen, as opposed to feeding live video of that person.

So, if you are having a Web conference, make sure everybody has a picture of the remote person, giving people something they can focus on as they listen. In fact, this tactic can reduce the amount of other operations since it almost elicits a feeling of being watched. People tend to avoid interrupting or ignoring what is going on if the speaker's picture is in view. You will not forget those who are remote, not as easily anyway.

Even if it is not a webinar and you are just holding a phone conversation, you might want to circulate pictures of the group so people can stick them up on a bulletin board.

For web conference, make sure everybody has a picture of the remote person, giving people something they can focus on as they listen.

This simple tactic can reduce the amount of other operations since it almost elicits a feeling of being watched.

People tend to avoid interrupting or ignoring what is going on if the speaker's picture is in view.

During conversation, eyes will drift to the person who is speaking, and it will make a difference.

Of course, you always need backup methods for communications because technology often fails. And, when it does, those suffering most are the people at the greatest distance or with the weakest lines. An example of backup would be making sure that everyone has received in advance all the charts that are needed for a particular webinar or call.

Because there can sometimes be a delay on the Web that is nearly intolerable for those connecting from another country or continent and people need to be able to follow along and participate.

One great method for a team to build camaraderie is to share the work, preferably by sharing a workflow tool that gives people awareness that there are jobs that they could do.



Sensitive forums are places where people register their concerns.

Sensitive forums provide places to take care of the anxieties, unfairness, and everything else that can worry people.

Rather than just parcelling out a bunch of individual assignments, workflow tools highlight where others can pitch in and impart progress toward deadlines and milestones. Again, make sure everybody is comfortable with these tools because they can be very alienating and may cause people to 'drop out'.

You may want to systematically build social capital. One method that can work is a series of interviews using 'chat technology'. Live interviews via chat software can also allow any number of people to participate by watching the interview, just to see what happens.

This activity has two benefits. One is that it connects everybody and the other is that you have an immediate, persistent way of learning about a team member. It is a highly recommended technique. Even better, invest in face-to-face if that is possible. It has often been said 'if you can't smell the person, then you're going to run into problems'. It can be invaluable to make the investment to meet in person, particularly in cases where you are doing 'delicate things'.

Groups have turned around by being able to just get together for one time.

One solution in common use before the days of Web newsgroups was to create sensitive forums – places to take care of the anxieties, unfairness, and everything else that worried people. Sensitive forums are places where people register their concerns, such as;

"You shouldn't use this phrasing"

"We don't understand it when you talk about this"

"I don't think that we're asking this person's opinion enough"

"You're not coming to me with questions"

"You're forgetting about me when I'm on a phone call"

The process has to be managed very carefully, but it can be a good way to take those discussions out of the meeting itself and recorded in a separate place where they can be handled carefully and well.

Also on the list are facilitators, which can be a big investment, but you might want a trained facilitator on the team. Then, there are a number of interesting tools that can help establish presence, providing immediate visual representation of the degree of involvement of each meeting attendee. In fact, you can also handle group participation by establishing rules of conduct, describing whether people are allowed to do certain activities at specified times.





Finally, webinars are important, but try to do them as two-handed exercises – with both a speaker and a monitor. So, not only are there charts for attendees, but the group has a continual opportunity to chat.

To work two-handed, one person is speaking about the charts and a second person in the same room is looking at the text. By being right there, that person knows when to interrupt and say *"Excuse me, we've got a question from Mr. Randolph and I'd like to pass it on to you."* It

does not break the rhythm, it's more natural and everyone gets to participate in a fair way.

Though it is easy to get discouraged about virtual teams, in fact, they can be great for both the company and for individuals. All sorts of people have met through virtual teams and established great relationships. It is definitely possible and even though you may need to work toward improvement in certain areas, it really is worth the effort.



Biography of John Blackwell Business Transformer



John's focus is inspiring leadership to innovate new work futures, bound together with a compelling philosophy founded on his 35-year board level experience.

In recent years, corporate life has been jolted by a series of seemingly insurmountable wake-up calls – uncertain energy supplies, climate change, and an all-consuming economic crisis for example.

History dictates that, when confronted with such adversity, leaders must innovate and to do so, they must be willing to think in new ways.

John is one of the world's leading business gurus, specialising in creating inspiring new work scenarios, drawing on his own board experiences with some of the biggest firms; including MCI and IBM. His career has seen John privileged to work with such luminaries as Vint Cerf^{vii} – a founding father of the internet.

He is the best-selling author of countless business titles, including; *"A Mandate for Change"*, *"Workplace of the Future"*, *"Smartworking"*, and *"What's the Office For"* – some 60 or more titles can be found at the [online library](#) maintained by John's business, [JBA](#)

John is a regular TV commentator, having appeared on BBC Breakfast,

Newsnight, CNN, Radio 4, Sky News, et al, and a prolific columnist, contributing to the Times, Financial Times, Sunday Times, Management Issues, Director, Capital Magazine, Public Policy Forum.

He is a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, a visiting fellow at three universities, and Director of Research at Henley Business School.

This unrivalled business acumen has led John to facilitate and host conferences all over the world, and provide board level mentoring to a portfolio of over 350 of the world's largest organisations in the process.

John challenges leadership to question habits and conventions. Working together, he helps dismantle barriers, overcome corporate inertia, and embrace a mandate for change.

He has built his reputation on knowing organisations better than they do themselves; providing answers and solutions to problems that stifle the workplace.

His messages are practical, real life experiences presented with electrifying effect. He both shakes up and inspires his leaders, showing them not only what lies within their grasp but also when to grasp the nettle; keeping them one-step ahead of the chasing pack.

Transformation has never been easy, but against this setting, it's going to be more possible than usual.



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iv "Capitalising on connections: Social capital and strategic management". Nahapiet, J. 2009 In V. Bartkus. V. and J. Davis (eds.) "Reaching Out, Reaching In: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Social Capital". Edward Elgar

Social capital describes the pattern and intensity of networks among people and the shared values that arise from those networks. Greater interaction between people generates a greater sense of community spirit.

Definitions of social capital include citizenship, 'neighbourliness', social networks and civic participation – a network with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups. Research (above) has shown that higher levels of social capital are associated with better health, higher educational achievement, and better employment outcomes.

v "Effective Work in the 21st Century", Blackwell, J. W.; Redman, T.; Durham University (2009 - 2011)

vi "Liberating Human Performance: Communities of Practice", Blackwell, J., Kogan Page 2003

vii Vint Cerf is widely referred to as the "father of the internet". Vint developed the TCP/IP technology – which led to the internet becoming a viable commercial opportunity.

Vint holds numerous honorary degrees and awards including the National Medal of Technology, Turing Award, and Presidential Medal of Freedom.

