

# CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL PROJECT TEAMS AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM

Lim Chee Leng  
dsgarylim7899@gmail.com

Prof. Dr. Amani Ali  
amanialielmetwaly@gmail.com

**Cairo University, Egypt**

***Abstract :** As employers recognize the benefits of non-traditional workplaces, virtual team challenges are emerging alongside the popularity of such teams. Remote workers provide the flexibility to choose the best and brightest, regardless of location. In this win-win digital setting, employers reap the advantages of quality work, while employees relish the freedom of remote work. Yet, understanding the challenges of virtual teams is crucial for success. Virtual teams are collections of individuals collaborating remotely, illustrating one of the quintessential challenges of virtual teams – distance. These teams can comprise employees from various offices or individuals working from home. With technological advancements like email and other communication tools, the rise of virtual teams, especially post-COVID19 in 2020, underscores the ever-evolving landscape of virtual team challenges.*

***Keywords :** Managing virtual ,Teams, Strategies , tools*

2024 JGBSE

Article Received : 12 April 2024, Revised : 18 April 2024, Accepted : 29 May 2024

## **The Increased Use Virtual Teams**

With the surge in the use of online platforms, businesses are moving most of their operations online. Virtual team challenges arise as individuals from around the globe need to access the same projects and communicate as seamlessly as they would face-to-face. Understanding the challenges of virtual teams, many forward-thinking employers are embracing digital workplaces. The concept of the digital nomad may be relatively new, but it underscores the rising demand for workplace flexibility. This shift in work dynamics is why numerous companies are choosing virtual teams, understanding the virtual team challenges, instead of relying solely on traditional brick-and-mortar setups

## **Virtual Teams Leadership**

Understanding the virtual team challenges in today's digital workspace is crucial. Since virtual teams require a distinctive framework, managers must grasp the nuances of running such setups, emphasizing the significance of time management. Establishing clear communication guidelines can be a solution to some challenges of virtual teams, ensuring everyone aligns. A

proficient manager is pivotal in setting up a well-structured digital workplace, fostering cohesive collaboration among members. Project milestones are essential tools for project managers. Representing successful phase completion, critical deadlines, or a deliverable, they serve as guideposts, especially when navigating the challenges of virtual teams.

### **The Role Business Leaders Take In Supporting Virtual Teams**

With a robust foundation of training and task management, leaders can effectively steer virtual teams, addressing the virtual team challenges head-on. It's vital to see the overarching framework, recognize the integral elements, and preempt potential pitfalls. Implementing a risk assessment matrix can illuminate this journey and be instrumental in project risk assessment. It's worth noting the positive side of the challenges of virtual teams: studies validate that remote workers tend to be happier and more productive. Investing in virtual teams translates to a significant 13.5% surge in efficiency.

### **Communication Differences in Virtual Teams**

A predominant aspect of virtual team challenges revolves around communication. With each team member possibly having distinct preferences, some might lean towards email, while others find instant messaging more efficient. For optimal management of virtual team communication, it's imperative to establish a framework conducive to collaboration. Instituting set business hours ensures that teammates, even digital nomads living in places like Bali, are online during essential periods. Ensuring that all members comprehend the expected communication standards is vital. Emphasizing collaboration and brainstorming, akin to a physical team, underscores the essence of teamwork. Incorporating tools and practices that enhance virtual team collaboration can further streamline processes and strengthen team dynamics.

### **Solution: Communication**

Both virtual and physical workplaces face challenges of virtual teams, particularly communication. A competent manager's role in consolidating efforts to foster a cohesive virtual team is invaluable.

### **Lack of structure**

Another facet of virtual team challenges is the absence of a well-defined structure. It's crucial to frequently review processes and methodologies to enhance efficiency. Workflow analysis can shed light on the dynamics of your procedures.

### **Solution: Defined Workflow for Virtual Teams**

Having transparent standards and an online workflow is paramount. Several online tools facilitate global collaboration. While no single tool universally suffices, many teams find centralized information hubs beneficial.

## Challenges of Distrust in Virtual Teams

Investments without visible outcomes can breed distrust, a substantial challenge in virtual teams. For instance, delayed responses from a colleague can seed doubt, potentially leading to feelings of imbalance in workload contribution.

One of the significant challenges of virtual teams, distrust, can corrode team synergy. It's essential to maintain transparent task management tools that display individual contributions.

### Solution: Transparency in Workload Distribution

Promoting transparency concerning each member's contributions deters the onset of distrust. Misunderstandings can escalate, so clarity is fundamental.



## Virtual Team challenges & their solutions

Virtual teams face challenges such as communication barriers, time zone differences, and building trust. Solutions include establishing clear communication channels, utilising time zone converters, fostering transparency and accountability, and conducting regular team-building activities.

Embracing technology, setting clear goals, and promoting work-life balance are key strategies for success. Here are the various challenges encountered with their corresponding solutions:

### a) Overcoming communication hurdles

Communication challenges rank as the primary concern for most businesses when managing virtual teams. Unlike traditional offices, there's a lack of spontaneous, face-to-face interactions and non-verbal cues.

It is crucial to note that prolonged periods without contact can lead to feelings of isolation and increase the risk of miscommunication within virtual teams. To address these challenges,

leverage various communication channels such as virtual classrooms, video conferencing, collaboration platforms, digital whiteboards, and screen sharing.

Moreover, these tools promote transparency and simplify the exchange of complex ideas. Prioritise deploying these technologies before commencing work with a virtual team. Additionally, hiring individuals with strong communication skills can facilitate smoother collaboration.

Furthermore, foster a culture of open communication within your teams, encouraging accessibility and regular dialogue. Providing training on effective communication can also mitigate project obstacles and conflicts within virtual teams.

### **b) Filling the void of social interaction**

Virtual teams face the challenge of limited social interaction, as team members naturally enjoy informal discussions about work, personal interests, and hobbies. These interactions provide relief from stress and foster camaraderie, which usually lacks in virtual workspaces.

Here are the actions to take:

- a) Encourage informal communication through instant messaging during downtime.
- b) Incorporate social time into the work calendar for non-work-related interactions.
- c) Organise team competitions with rewards to foster engagement.
- d) Introduce brain games, quizzes, or puzzles to enhance team bonding.

Virtual teams encounter the absence of genuine social engagement, missing the spontaneous discussions that occur during breaks in traditional office settings. To mitigate this, encourage team members to use instant messaging for casual catchups during free time.

You can also incorporate scheduled social sessions into the work calendar, providing opportunities for non-work-related interactions. Dividing the team into smaller groups for friendly competitions with incentives can also foster camaraderie and engagement.

### **c) Building trust in remote collaboration**

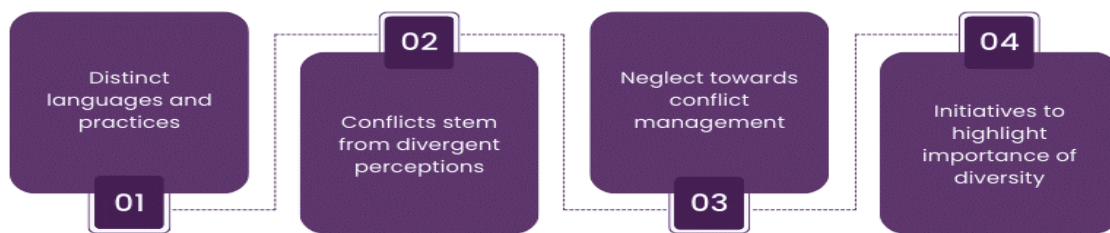
Working with virtual teams often leads to trust issues due to the lack of visibility into team members' activities, delayed responses, and asynchronous work schedules. If left unaddressed, these issues can significantly impact productivity over time.

Here are the following actions that you can take:

- a) Establish shared goals and recognise each member's contributions.
- b) Set regular goals on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis.

- c) Encourage collaboration and mutual support among team members.
- d) Utilise virtual team collaboration tools to facilitate communication and transparency, fostering respect and trust among team members.

#### d) Managing cultural variances



Cultural diversity often surfaces when collaborating within expansive teams composed of individuals from varied cultural backgrounds. Each culture brings its unique languages, religious beliefs, dietary practices, and customs.

Now cultural conflicts may arise due to:

- a) Lack of awareness or sensitivity toward other cultures
- b) Misinterpretations among team members
- c) Relying on cultural stereotypes
- d) Absence of diversity training

Multicultural team dynamics tend to reveal conflicts stemming from divergent perceptions between multi-cultural managers. Clashes emerged due to differing cultural dimensions, particularly concerning individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance.

Neglecting to address such conflicts in virtual team management can result in costly legal repercussions and reputational damage. Some actionable steps you can take are to prioritise workplace ethics and diversity training before operationalising your virtual team.

Such an initiative will underscore the significance of cultural diversity, impart strategies for mitigating related issues, and familiarise team members with relevant legal frameworks.

### **e) Cultivating team unity from a distance**

The completion of business projects, regardless of scale, seldom relies solely on individual efforts; rather, it is typically the outcome of consistent teamwork. Central to this collaboration is the camaraderie among team members, vital for maintaining cohesion and morale.

Regrettably, globally dispersed remote teams frequently struggle with fostering team spirit. Along the journey, the connection between team members often appears to dissipate, for various reasons.

Here are the following actions to take:

- a) You can address this issue by clarifying the connection between each member's individual objectives and the collective goal of the entire team from the outset.
- b) You can also organise regular virtual meetings to share progress updates and success stories, reinforcing the team's commitment to shared objectives.
- c) You can then utilise the shared vision to establish SMART goals, i.e. 'Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound' to guide the team's efforts effectively.

### **f) Mitigating distractions in virtual workspaces**

Similar to physical workspaces, virtual workplaces have a number of distractions, e.g. kids who need attention, family members who require care, noise from the neighbourhood, constant notifications from devices, and so on.

While you may not be able to eliminate these common distractions completely, you can definitely try to minimise them.

Here are some key steps you can take:

- a) Make sure your virtual teams stick to a work routine similar to what they would do in a brick-and-mortar office. This will enable them to dedicate a fixed amount of time to office work each day.
- b) Time and productivity tracking applications, such as DeskTime, can prove useful in increasing the focus of your teams and understanding how your teams are utilising their time.
- c) If possible, you can also request your team members to set up an office-like zone in their homes or from wherever they are working. Preferably, it can be a quiet room free from distractions.

## g) Balancing time zone disparities

theknowledgeacademy



This is a recurring challenge that garners frequent discussion at the workplace. It's not uncommon for companies to observe one group of team members in one time zone winding down for the day while another group in a different zone is just beginning their work shift.

At times, the time zone disparity between two regions is substantial, extending beyond just a couple of hours. For instance, the time zone variance between India and the USA serves as a notable example.

Such discrepancies can foster a sense of disconnection among virtual team members.

Here are the following actions you can take to balance your team's disparities:

a) Deploying robust collaboration tools like Google Drive is crucial in overcoming this challenge. These tools facilitate streamlined team communication and enable connectivity regardless of location.

b) Implementing time overlapping strategies offers another solution for Virtual Teams to accommodate time zone differences. Teams in different time zones can identify overlapping hours when both sides are available and working concurrently. During these periods, scheduling status meetings and other essential activities ensures the participation of both teams.

c) Leveraging video conferencing recording software and transcripts provides an additional solution. This allows team members who couldn't attend a session to catch up later, fostering inclusivity and ensuring information dissemination despite time zone disparities.

## h) Streamlining prompt responses

In the absence of face-to-face interaction, you need to communicate with your virtual teams via email, chat, and other means of online communication. Add to this the fact that different people work on different schedules or timetables.

This can lead to delayed responses, misunderstandings, disorganization, and chaos. Sometimes you need to send multiple reminders to get the information you need.

A helpful step that you can take is to keep a common time slot when everyone is available online for communication can be helpful. This system will support everyone and make workflow more efficient, besides helping you avoid delays and setbacks.

### **i) Establishing effective workflow structures**

While virtual work offers unparalleled flexibility and convenience, it's crucial to maintain stability amidst this fluidity.

At times, individuals may take undue liberties with this arrangement, ultimately disrupting workflow.

Actions to Take:

- a) Establish discipline within virtual teams by adhering strictly to established processes.
- b) Introduce structure into daily tasks and ensure team compliance with it, enabling standardization across various tasks from inception to completion.
- c) Conduct a comprehensive workflow analysis and optimize it to enhance efficiency, productivity, and overall success.
- d) Leverage workflow management tools to facilitate better collaboration and project management, ensuring smoother operations within the virtual environment.

### **j) Elevating productivity in virtual team environments**

This ranks among the foremost challenges encountered by virtual teams. The absence of a traditional office environment, inefficient time management, and the lack of defined boundaries regarding task commencement and completion can significantly diminish productivity.

When productivity suffers within a virtual team setting, it's imperative to reassess and implement corrective measures.

Actions to Take:

- a) Make sure that everyone has a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and be accountable for delivering on them.
- b) Address underperformers while also acknowledging and rewarding top achievers, as motivation closely correlates with productivity.
- c) Streamline processes to ensure transparency and alignment among team members. Regular check-ins should be established to monitor progress and task completion effectively.



## Conclusion

The Challenges of Virtual Teams, ranging from communication barriers to productivity hurdles, underscore the importance of proactive strategies and effective teamwork. By fostering clear communication, promoting accountability, and leveraging technology, virtual teams can overcome obstacles and thrive in a remote work environment.

## References

- "Latest Work-at-Home/Telecommuting/Remote Work Statistics". *Global Workplace Analytics*. Retrieved 2021-11-01.
- Ale Ebrahim, Nader; Ahmed, Shamsuddin; Taha, Zahari (2009). "Virtual R&D Teams in Small and Medium Enterprises: A Literature Review". *Scientific Research and Essays*. 4 (13): 1575–1590. SSRN 1530904.
- Anne Powell, Gabriele Piccoli, and Blake Ives. Virtual teams: a review of current literature and directions for future research. *The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems* - Winter Vol. 35, issue 1, 2004
- AT&T. (2004). The remote working revolution. Retrieved November 8, 2005, from [http://www.business.att.com/resource.jsp?&rtype=Whitepaper&rvalue=the\\_remote\\_working\\_revolution](http://www.business.att.com/resource.jsp?&rtype=Whitepaper&rvalue=the_remote_working_revolution).
1. Cohen, S. G., & Gibson, C. B. (2003). "What Factors Affect Team Performance in Virtual Teams?" *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*. [Link to journal](#). By addressing these challenges with the solutions
- Gibson, C. B., & Gibbs, J. L. (2006). "Unpacking the Concept of Virtuality: Learning from High Technology and Virtual Teams." *The Leadership Quarterly*. [Link to journal](#).
- Gibson, Cristina B.; Gibbs, Jennifer L. (September 2006). "Unpacking the Concept of Virtuality: The Effects of Geographic Dispersion, Electronic Dependence, Dynamic Structure, and National Diversity on Team Innovation". *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 51 (3): 451–495. doi:10.2189/asqu.51.3.451. ISSN 0001-8392. S2CID 10856839.
- Griffith, Terri L.; Sawyer, John E.; Neale, Margaret A. (2003). "Virtualness and Knowledge in Teams: Managing the Love Triangle of Organizations, Individuals, and Information Technology". *MIS Quarterly*. 27 (2): 265–287. doi:10.2307/30036531. ISSN 0276-7783. JSTOR 30036531.
- Hertel, G., Geister, S., & Konradt, U. (2005). Managing virtual teams: A review of current empirical research. *Human Resource Management Review*, 15(1), 69–95.
- Hill, E. J., Miller, B. C., Weiner, S. P., & Colihan, J. (1998). Influences of the virtual office on aspects of work and work/life balance. *Personnel Psychology*, 51(3), 667–683.
- Igbaria, M., & Guimaraes, T. (1999). Exploring differences in employee turnover intentions and its determinants among telecommuters and non-telecommuters. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 16(1): 147-164.
- Kanawattanachai, P., and Y. Yoo (2002). "Dynamic nature of trust in virtual teams." *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 11: 187–213.
- Kirkman, B. L., B. Rosen, C. B. Gibson, P. E. Tesluk, and S. O. McPherson (2002). "Five challenges to virtual team success: Lessons from Sabre, Inc." *Academy of Management Executive*, 16 (3): 67–79.
- Kirkman, Bradley L.; Mathieu, John E. (2005-10-01). "The Dimensions and Antecedents of Team Virtuality". *Journal of Management*. 31 (5): 700–718. doi:10.1177/0149206305279113. ISSN 0149-2063. S2CID 993996.
- Kizza, J. M. (2013). *Ethical and social issues in the information age*. London, England: Springer-Verlag.

- Lipnack, Jessica (2000) [1997]. *Virtual Teams: People Working Across Boundaries with Technology*. John Wiley & Sons. pp. 352. ISBN 978-0471388258.
- Madhavan, Ravindranath; Grover, Rajiv (1998). "From Embedded Knowledge to Embodied Knowledge: New Product Development as Knowledge Management". *Journal of Marketing*. 62 (4): 1–12. doi:10.2307/1252283. ISSN 0022-2429. JSTOR 1252283.
- Maloney, Mary M.; Zellmer-Bruhn, Mary E. (2006). "Building bridges, windows and cultures: Mediating mechanisms between team heterogeneity and performance in global teams". *Management International Review*. 46 (6): 697–720. doi:10.1007/s11575-006-0123-5 ISSN 1861-8901.
- Martin, Jeffrey A.; Eisenhardt, Kathleen M. (2010-04-01). "Rewiring: Cross-Business-Unit Collaborations in Multibusiness Organizations". *Academy of Management Journal*. 53 (2): 265–301. doi:10.5465/amj.2010.49388795. ISSN 0001-4273.
- Martins, L. L., Gilson, L. L., & Maynard, M. T. (2004). "Virtual Teams: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?" *Team Performance Management*. [Link to journal](#).
- Martins, L. L., L. L. Gilson, and M. T. Maynard 2004 "Virtual teams: What do we know and where do we go from here?" *Journal of Management*, 30: 805–835.
- Nevogt, Dave. "No Excuses: The Definitive Guide to Building a Remote Team: Table of Contents". *Hubstaff*. Retrieved 21 June 2013.
- Nickson, D., & Siddons, S. (2004). *Remote working- Linking people and organizations*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Nonaka, I., and H. Takeuchi 1995 *The Knowledge Creating Company*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Powell, A., Piccoli, G., & Ives, B. (2004). "Virtual Teams: A Review of Current Literature and Directions for Future Research." *ACM SIGMIS Database*. [Link to journal](#).
- Ramsower, R. M. (1983) *Telecommuting: An investigation of some organizational and behavioral effects of working at home*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- Sole, Deborah; Edmondson, Amy (2002). "Situated Knowledge and Learning in Dispersed Teams" (PDF). *British Journal of Management*. 13 (S2): S17–S34. doi:10.1111/1467-8551.13.s2.3. ISSN 1467-8551. S2CID 16422610.
- Stanko, T. L., C. B. Gibson. 2009. Virtuality here and now: The role of cultural elements in virtual teams. R. S. Bhagat, R. M. Steers, eds. *Cambridge Handbook of Culture, Organization, and Work*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 272–304.
- Vlaar, P (2008). "Co Creating Understanding And Value In Distributed Work". *MIS Quarterly*. 32 (2): 227–255. doi:10.2307/25148839. JSTOR 25148839.
- Warkentin, M., & Beranek, P. M. (1999). "Team Collaboration in the Virtual Workplace: A Framework for Research." *Small Group Research*. [Link to journal](#).