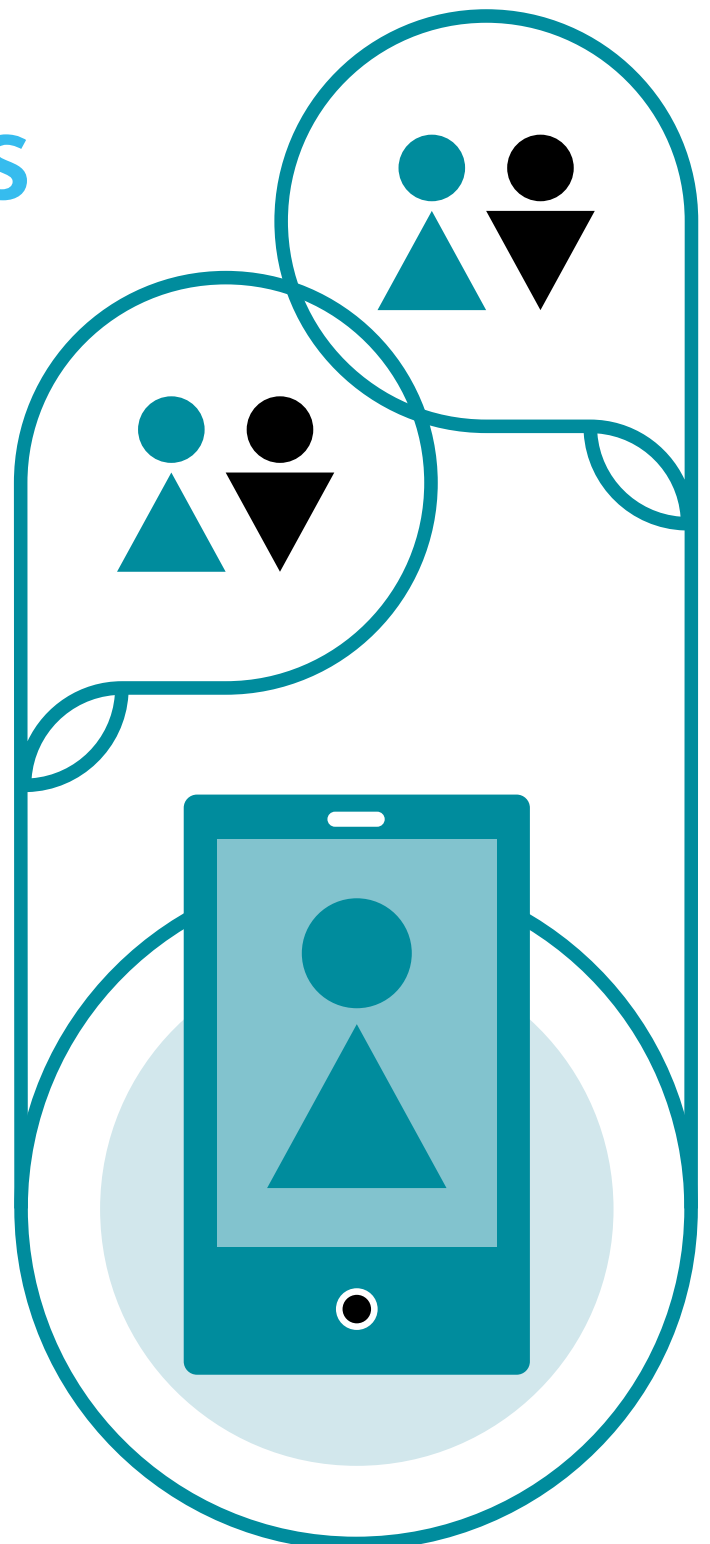


Guidelines for Leading and Managing Virtual Teams



Read this guidance alongside ILM's latest research: Going remote: leading dispersed teams

Remote and virtual working is a reality of the modern workplace. The London Global Leaders' Summit reported that more than a third of executives expect over half of their full-time employees will be working remotely by 2020 (LBS, 2014). Managers and leaders are becoming accustomed to the idea that they might see their staff only infrequently with some team members possibly working from home only a few miles away and others living and working on a different continent and in a different time zone. Whatever the difficulties posed by issues of location, culture and geography, virtual team leaders must still deliver team performance and organizational outcomes by understanding the challenges and identifying good practices. Much leadership and management practice is not yet adjusted to the changes remote working requires: more deliberate and transparent management, effective reporting and higher levels of trust.

Our research highlighted a range of potential benefits for organisations who take advantage of a remote or geographically-dispersed workforce, including increased business reach, improved productivity, cost and time savings, and access to a more diverse set of skills and experience. The enormous potential for working remotely to increase autonomy and enhance employee wellbeing is all too often impeded by miscommunication and poor working practices. We identified a number of barriers to effective working, including over-reliance on email, inadequate or unclear communication and a lack of shared identity and focus.

- ▶ 88% of remote workers struggle with inconsistent working practices and miscommunication
- ▶ 83% remote workers felt overwhelmed by email, as teams fail to capitalise on alternative technologies, such as video or audio conferencing
- ▶ 84% of remote workers report improvements to their work-life balance, but concerns were expressed that working remotely can cause isolation and loneliness

This research led us to develop these guidelines, practical suggestions as to the actions virtual team leaders and managers, and virtual team members can take to ensure that work performance is successful and satisfying when team members live and work apart.

a Communicate Rules of Communication

Sound communications are critical to the success of any team, virtual teams spanning geography and time zones need to be even better communicators. Not only will the methods of communication need to be considered, but also the regularity of their use, and the technical backup required to ensure they work. We found from our research that poor communication (such as email overload and misunderstandings) was the key area of difficulty for virtual teams.

- 1 Hold regular face to face meetings or video alternatives to enable face to face contact between team members.
- 2 Limit the number of people on conference calls, three is ideal, beware of combining voice only and face to face communication.
- 3 Arrange meetings to maximise attention by keeping them short and focused and only include those people who have a contribution to make.
- 4 Send voice or video messages rather than email as virtual team members can become overwhelmed by unnecessary volumes of email.
- 5 Limit the use of email, always ask yourself whether a phone call, audio or video message is a more effective means of getting your message understood and may result in fewer misunderstandings.
- 6 If email is the best communication method, maintain proper email discipline. Use correct titles, explain why you have cc'd others into the communication and when emotions are high, think carefully before selecting 'send'.

7 Multicultural teams require additional consideration in the use of images, language and terminology to ensure that no offense is caused.

8 If using social media platforms, ensure there are separate chat tools for work and social topics.

b Wellbeing and Work Life Balance

Working on your own can be isolating and it is important to provide relevant levels of support to virtual team members. Such support should include consideration of work/life balance issues and how to ensure that team members work effectively and achieve their targets whilst at the same time gaining the benefits that virtual working can offer. Where team members do seem to demonstrate levels of anxiety, depression or disengagement, formal support mechanisms need to be in place.

- 1 Schedule regular checks with team members and make time to discuss all aspects of the pressures that members are experiencing and their impact on work performance.
- 2 Monitor work levels carefully to ensure that work demands are appropriate; and that individuals are not being overburdened or set unrealistic time scales.
- 3 Remember that flexible working should benefit the organization and the individual and the balance needs to be maintained.
- 4 Managers should encourage staff to separate their work/life boundaries by leading by example.

c Make a Video

Virtual team members need to know, understand and share their team's vision i.e. it's key priorities on how their team links to the wider organization. Each team member should make a short video explaining how their role fits into the team; how they like to work, their understanding of the team's purpose and what they admire about their co-workers. This video will then:

- 1 Contribute to the articulation of a set of common values that are made explicit.
- 2 Enable managers to share their expectations in a transparent way.
- 3 Enable members to voice their expectations about their individual home working arrangements and how flexible they can be.
- 4 Make 'ground rules' and protocols explicit and so set the tone to ensure that goals, deadlines, technology etiquette, and cultural norms are known, understood and applied appropriately.

d Team Build

Awareness that virtual teams need to be built and attention paid to maintaining good relationships is key. A lack of social interaction may make it more difficult to build and maintain trust.

- 1 Support team members to travel to meet regularly in person, and ensure that there is at least one or two meetings a year when everyone can get together.
- 2 Social time- even if it is virtual- should be communicated as an important agenda item.
- 3 Encourage team members to develop personal relationships with each other, the use of informal communication methods will support this.
- 4 Team building will be helped where a sense of identity is built through the use of names, brands, logos etc.

e Training and Development for virtual working

Working in virtual teams requires a wide range of skills such as innovative thinking, openness to new ideas, creativity, and a broad business perspective. Managers of virtual teams need to appreciate the differences and challenges and adapt their leadership style to inspire and motivate their people just as they would if their team was located nearby in a physical office. Expertise in leading virtual teams may be gained from experience but training and development can accelerate this process.

- 1 Ensure a virtual team working induction is provided for all team members.
- 2 Invest in technology and relevant digital and social media training for everyone.
- 3 Set up a formal mentoring programme to support those moving into virtual teams so valuable experience is passed on, that feelings of isolation are minimized and help is on hand if needed.
- 4 Training in coaching skills for managers who lead virtual teams will improve communication and assist in talent development.

**For more information,
contact ILM Research Team**

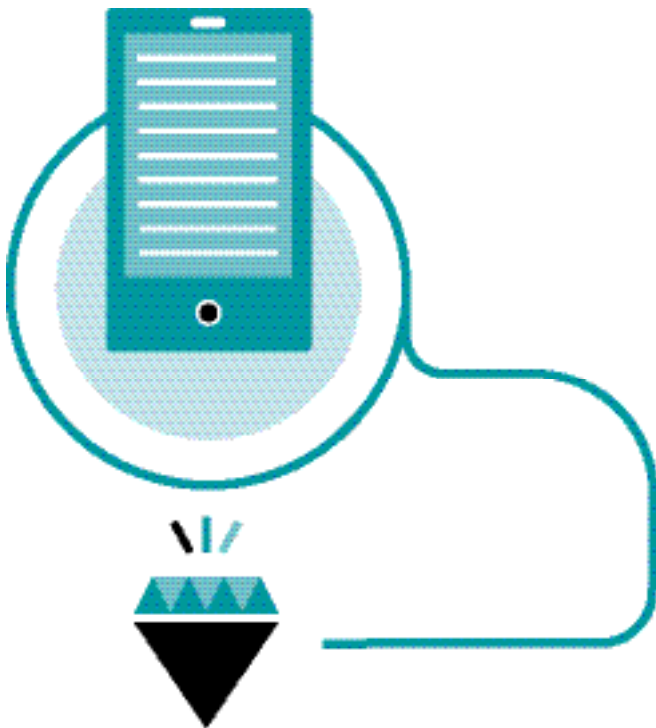
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