6 golden rules for working successfully in virtual teams

White paper – Dr. Peter Emele and Norbert Skubch

Working in teams is a critical success factor for the continued existence of companies and organisations during the current COVID-19 pandemic. When social contact is suppressed to a large extent, this is the only way of working that can ensure that services are provided and sales generated.

Having said that, virtual collaboration is nothing new – people have been working in virtual environments for many years, e.g. in international teams where geographical distance is a barrier to purely physical cooperation. What is new however is the pressure, the urgency of virtual collaboration combined with the number of directly affected employees.

JSC AG has the relevant experience in this field. Leading and supporting international, multidisciplinary and multicultural project teams is and has always been one of their core activities.
JSC AG has delved into this extensive experience to develop six golden rules to guarantee effective and efficient virtual working in teams:

(1) **IT is a "conditio sine qua non"** – a reliable and powerful IT platform that equally supports communication and group work is an essential requirement for effective virtual working in teams.

The Microsoft family is the de facto standard, consisting mainly of …

o **MS Outlook** – used to send and receive emails as well as manage appointments, contacts, tasks and notes

o **MS Teams** – a platform that combines chats, meetings, notes and attachments with each other. At the end of 2018 Microsoft announced that Teams is the fastest growing application in the history of the company. This trend was further strengthened by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The number of daily active users rose from by more than 12 million to 44 million within a week.

o **MS SharePoint** – a content management system, supports collaboration, e.g. on projects or in social networks using personal websites, team websites, forums or blogs.

o **Skype** – an instant messaging service launched in 2003 and owned by Microsoft since 2011. Facilitates video conferences, IP telephony, instant messaging, file transfer and screen sharing. "Skype for Business" is being successively replaced by MS Teams.

o Depending on the edition, all of the above elements are now included in the MS Office 365 suite.

Almost all companies and organisations are more or less familiar with the IT platform. They administer it themselves (on premise) or use cloud services provided by third parties or run a combination of these – together with other products available on the market, as the case may be.

The focus of the following rules is therefore less on further detailing the technical platforms than on the accompanying conceptual rules that promote successful virtual work.

Mathematicians would say that the IT platform is the necessary condition, and the conceptual set of rules the ample condition for successful virtual collaboration.

(2) **The more virtual the collaboration, the more control is required** – the possibility of being able to intervene quickly and directly in team behaviour when physically on site must be substituted by equally effective instruments in virtual teams.

These include daily updated To Do lists for transparency of completed, delayed or pending tasks in the team. They are then discussed in daily jour fixe meetings – particularly in the initial phases – to guarantee orchestrated teamwork.

Alignment between a team and the management has to be closer and more intensively timed too.

As a general rule, virtual meetings require better preparation and follow-up (e.g. a structured agenda, minutes with clear allocation of agreed tasks).

(3) **Virtual meetings require stringent moderation** – a virtual meeting is considerably more difficult to moderate than meetings that are attended by all of the participants in person. There is a simple reason for this that is deeply rooted in the history of our evolution: people read people better when they are face to face.

This means that those chairing virtual meetings have to lead and direct the discussion more – this can be achieved by setting clear rules for the sequence of the discussion, repeating decisions taken and allocated tasks. In simple terms, the moderator must ensure that clarity prevails.

This is supported by: speaking loudly and clearly, letting others finish what they want to say, listening attentively, using clear and understandable language when writing and speaking as well as presenting, and observing the principle of "less is more".

(4) **Without a structure, virtual collaboration goes up in smoke** – virtual teams need a clear communication and filing structure to be able to work effectively.

Communication is essential for virtual collaboration as a matter of principle. The task is, however, to strike a balance between target-oriented communication and that which fosters creativity.

The problem with modern technology though is that it is tempting to use communication for its own sake and then to lose sight of the task at hand. The consequence is that participants start to use chats because it's fun, and operate blogs because they are trendy.

The repository used by the project team with a standard structure and binding naming conventions e.g. for final reports, working documents, meeting documents, project management, notes and source material is a valuable contribution as the central hub for the project team.

(5) **A new leadership style is required for leading virtual teams** – managers' leadership style has to adapt to the peculiarities of virtual work.

Managers see their employees seldom and then only remotely. It is difficult to recognise their emotional state "at a glance". They can no longer reach out to their employees and find out how they are doing in a one-to-one conversation.

Managers must compensate for this deficit by using other channels. In virtual one-to-one conversations experienced managers can find out how an employee is feeling in an open dialogue.

They should also be able to give regular open feedback to employees remotely. This includes being able to see how employees react to the feedback.

A formal manager transforms into the coach of their employees in virtual teams. Building trust, strengthening motivation, practical help at work following the motto of "Helping people to help themselves" (community capacity building) become focal challenges. In this way, good managers succeed in securing employee loyalty to the company even at a distance.

(6) **Simulate the office work schedule in the home office** – when working in virtual teams gradually moves into the home, a couple of rituals should be observed to make the transition easier.

Working in the home office calls for rituals that help separate the private from the professional. One ritual is, for example, to start the day just as if one is going into the office: get up, take a shower, have breakfast and dress before sitting at one's desk and starting work.

"Going to work" is another ritual involving walking around the block and then returning home to start working.

The end of the working day can also be a ritual: a stroll with the family or sport marks the end of the working part of the day.

While working in the home office, it is important to signal to the rest of the family that one is at work. The home office employee should close the door of their office to show that they do not want to be disturbed …

… and the company, the manager has to accept that home office does not mean that the employee has to be reachable at all times.

If this topic has aroused your interest, you would like to discuss some of the addressed issues in more detail or you may be faced with one of the following three challenges in the near future …

- I have to substantially increase the amount of virtual collaboration

- I am not satisfied with the effectiveness and efficiency of my virtual teams

- I want to give my managers the skills to better lead virtual teams and projects

… we will be happy to talk to you.

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