Teaching Notes

Case Study Summary

In this case, students are introduced to a virtual team that was compiled to work on a temporary project with tight deadlines. Managed by DigiCo, the FLEC project brings together a group of geographically-dispersed individuals who perform different roles, ranging from project managers, to quality managers and translators. Due to its virtual nature, there is limited face-to-face communication, and the project relies on an online platform and email for team communications. After the start of the project, several team members begin to complain that there is a lack of communication among their co-workers that is affecting their individual performance. DigiCo manager, Marie, is struggling to address this challenge and prevent it from jeopardising the overall project performance. The case asks what a manager’s role should be in such virtual team situations. Students are also encouraged to think in terms of what needs to be done in order to avoid such situations.

Teaching Objectives

This case seeks to improve students’ knowledge of alternative work arrangements that differ from traditional collocated or permanent work.

Pedagogically, the case will introduce students to the concept of virtual working and enable them to critically assess the opportunities and challenges associated with this form of work as well as develop in students the capacity to manage in the virtual environment.

Target Audience

The case will be suitable for postgraduate students who take courses on e-business, Information Systems, Digital Business Transformation and International Business. The case may also be discussed at specialist undergraduate courses such as Virtual Organising, Digital Business Innovation, Global Management and Contemporary HRM.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

It is suggested that 60–90 minutes are allowed for discussing this case. The case is short enough to be read (15 minutes for reading) in the classroom. After reading the case, students should work in small groups to analyse the case and respond to the questions. Each group should be encouraged to give a presentation. Depending on the time available, each group may only want to identify issues that were discussed and were not noted by other groups.

The instructor could start the discussion by asking students to identify the characteristics that make FLEC a virtual project team (members are geographically dispersed, have been assigned a common task and use digital technologies for their communications). Discussion may also include the characteristics of the virtual workers: these could be contract labour, as in the case, who are recruited on a temporary contract due to their skills and experience. However, permanent employees may also be involved in virtual projects set up by their own organisation. Depending on the time available, the instructor may want to encourage a discussion on the pros and cons of using these different types of labour. For example, the former group may bring special expertise not available in-house; however, they may not
identify with the project or the organisation as much as the permanent employees. Recognising these differences becomes important for the effective management of virtual team projects as the different individuals involved may have different motives and commitment to the project.

To augment answers to the Discussion Questions, instructors may wish to review the following information about the key learning objectives of the case:

1. **Identify the core characteristics of virtual teams**

   A group of individuals who are geographically dispersed, who communicate in a technology-mediated environment and work towards a common purpose. I suggest that the role of technology in enabling dispersed individuals to work together and collaborate on joint projects is emphasised as this means that interactions among the individuals involved are technology mediated.

2. **Understand some of the opportunities and challenges of virtual teams**

   **Teaching Notes Table 1** provides a list of opportunities for both individuals and organisations. The main one that needs to be emphasised is the ability to access relevant expertise and the best talent regardless of location. However, there are challenges too, which relate to developing team identity, building integration among members who are there often for a short period of time, building trust and commitment. Chudoba et al. (2005) refer to these discontinuities in terms of technology, work practices, culture, organisational norms, language and temporal.

   **Teaching Notes Table 1. Benefits for individuals and organisations.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>Organisations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporal and spatial flexibility</td>
<td>Access to best talent regardless of location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>Access to best talent as need arises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work–life balance</td>
<td>Shorter employment contracts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wider variety of projects e.g., multi-tasking</td>
<td>Reduced overheads</td>
</tr>
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3. **Assess the challenges of managing virtual teams**

   Challenges include managing distance and diversity, developing trust when there is limited face to face contact, resolving conflict.

4. **Evaluate the core skills in leading virtual teams**
A virtual team leader or manager should be aware that leading virtual teams has some core differences to leading co-located teams. The fact that the team members are dispersed and communicate using different forms of digital technology, often on an asynchronous basis, make it difficult for the team to develop bonding and identity, which are useful for building commitment towards working for a common goal. Finding ways to do so would be a core skill in effectively leading virtual teams. Students should be encouraged to be creative and innovative when coming up with suggestions on how to improve bonding and identity within the online context: for example, virtual introductions; periodic group online synchronous meetings to give updates with individual contributions; organise face to face meetings if time and distance permit it; online group game and so on.

5. Explore the meaning of 'presence' online

Presence is often defined as the ‘state of being there,’ meaning that one is available and psychologically committed to the project or work at hand. Online, due to the lack of social cues, it is more difficult to say whether one is present. Students may be encouraged to identify ways that show one’s presence online (e.g., Skype’s symbols: available, invisible, or do not disturb; Whatsapp: last seen Wednesday 4:57 p.m. ...). Students should also be asked to share their feelings when others do not respond to their messages. What kind of negative reactions may this cause?

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

1. One of the benefits of working with virtual teams is flexibility.
   a. Assess the benefits and challenges of being a virtual team member, as presented in this case.

   Spatial and temporal flexibility are types of flexibility shown in the case. Specifically, virtual working allows individuals to work from home, or indeed from anywhere around the world; yet, work can be done with the use of digital technologies regardless of location. This alternative form of work also enables temporal flexibility, enabling individuals to choose when they work; as a result, some may choose to work around their family responsibilities (e.g., childcare or care of elderly relatives) or as allowed by other work commitments (e.g., ‘I work for two to three projects at the same time’). Challenges for the individuals working as virtual team members include social isolation, difficulty in resolving conflicts and developing trust with co-workers.

   b. What are the benefits and challenges for organisations working with a virtual team?

   One of the main benefits for organisations is the ability to access talent regardless of location. Other benefits include shorter employment contracts and reduced overheads. Table 1 shows a general overview of the benefits for both individuals and organisations alike. Challenges for organisations that manage virtual teams include the ability to build coordination and collaboration, and develop trust among the individuals involved, who often do not know each other and have not worked together before. Further to these, students should then be asked to think of challenges that virtual teams may face. These could be in terms of lack of face-to-face communication and, therefore, lack of familiarity with different team members and their roles, their commitments, interests, expertise, and so on. For global teams, other challenges include cultural as well as language and time-zone differences.
2. Assess the quotations from the virtual team and determine how project members’ lack of communication can jeopardise the success of the FLEC project. What else could be contributing to the issues that challenged team bonding and identity in this case?

The case shows that there has been lack of coherent communication among some members, though not all. We read about some members complaining that their co-workers and their project team supervisor, who is responsible for allocating work files to them, are not responding to attempted communications in a timely manner. This silence creates frustration, first among those members who have the availability to undertake more translations of work files but also among the virtual team managers such as Marie. For a virtual team project, it is a reasonable expectation for the managers and all involved to expect a responsive workforce. Projects have tight deadlines, and therefore members are expected to meet these deadlines. Where there are problems that may affect work delivery, these need to be communicated to others. If communication is poor, the members affected will feel frustrated and demoralised as their own performance, and therefore remuneration, might be affected. Students may note that this creates a cascade of circumstances that can jeopardise the success of the project. Students should be encouraged to assess explanations for these silences, such as family commitments, other work responsibilities or technical issues that may be considered legitimate reasons and therefore excused. In the discussion, it should be noted that it may not be reasonable to expect all members to be equally responsive – this would depend on their other commitments, personal and work related.

Nevertheless, virtual teams rely on communication, coordination and collaboration among the dispersed members. If there is a persistent lack of communication, this will jeopardise the overall project performance as members will not be able to meet the deadline set.

Lack of clarity of project roles and communication expectations, as well as a lack of clear coordination procedures, might be contributing to these silences, and this needs to be dealt with at the management level. The amount of commitment by all team members, including supervisors and individuals, should therefore be discussed openly before any agreement is made. Though this was something that was requested by DigiCo before the contract was signed, it seems that it was not reinforced during the project, contributing to the problems seen in the case. Students may also question the global challenges of time-zone and cultural issues in this project and how these may have an impact on commitment.

3. How could Marie respond to the challenges that the FLEC project faces?

It is important to note that FLEC relies on asynchronous communication for the team interactions. Students should be encouraged to identify the pros and cons of asynchronous and synchronous technologies. For example, they may discuss email versus skype; the latter is real time and has the capacity for face-to-face communication, which reveals rich cues about co-workers, including their appearance, emotions and body language. With regard to this question, students may make the following suggestions to Marie:

- Use synchronous communication to reinforce each member’s commitment on the project and check availability.
- Reset norms of behaviour.
- Re-allocate clear roles and responsibilities.
- Re-build a culture where members are encouraged to share challenges they face in a timely manner.
- Keep others informed if and when there are delays in communication.
• Use richer forms of communication to deal with the ‘silent’ and perhaps low-committed members (have face-to-face meetings, or make phone calls to resolve conflicts or misunderstandings).

A member’s silence may not, of course, be due to their low commitment on the project. Other issues may cause poor communication or online presence, such as technology-related difficulties, different work priorities (individuals may be involved in different projects at the same time) and family reasons, as discussed above, and this should be recognised when making recommendations to Marie.

4. How could virtual project leaders in general avoid these challenges and effectively manage virtual teams?

Developing effective coordination among the dispersed team members but also promoting bonding and commitment at an early stage of the team project are important capabilities that virtual team leaders need to have. The work by Hertel et al. (2005) and Zander et al. (2013) would be particularly helpful as they can guide the students to the different stages of virtual team development. Leaders can play a key role by introducing practices that are relevant to each of these stages. Figure 1 is indicative of such practices. The instructor can introduce these stages to the students and encourage discussion about what has already happened in the FLEC case and what could have happened in addition, for example, reinforce norms of behaviour at the Performing stage.

Figure 1. Stages of virtual team development.

Further Reading


References
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526441973