

LEARNING MADE EASY



Virtual Teams

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Launch virtual teams
in your organization

Utilize technology to
your advantage

Ensure a connected and
engaged team

Tara Powers, MS

CEO, Powers Resource Center



Virtual Teams

by Tara Powers, MS

for
dummies[®]
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Virtual Teams For Dummies®

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Introduction

Remote work options are driving workplace transformation, and what's known about the office, teamwork, and management will never be the same. In fact, over the next few years, some sources estimate that more than a billion people will work virtually.

New technologies are released everyday to keep people connected across cities, countries, and oceans. Collaborative software, videoconferencing, and online project management are designed to help remote teams of people work effectively together. But not just technology is fueling this trend — rising operational costs, growing commercial real estate expenses, and increasing globalization are other contributors, as well as the promise of higher productivity. Plus, as most hiring managers would probably tell you, the competition for finding and keeping skilled employees is fierce, so extending the geographic reach of your labor force is a huge benefit.

I wrote *Virtual Teams For Dummies* to help you discover everything you need to know about virtual teams and how to make them work. This book represents findings from my own research on virtual teams, my consulting work with virtual teams, and my experiences leading a virtual team for close to ten years. As a result, this book is chockfull with extensive tips, tools, frameworks, lessons learned, models, and checklists to help make your venture into the virtual team world successful.

Companies around the globe are launching headfirst into establishing virtual teams with barely a backward glance at the unique challenges for executives, leaders, and team members. *Virtual Teams For Dummies* provides you best practices, helps you overcome the unique challenges, and allows you to experience all the positive impacts that virtual teams have to offer.

About This Book

New books and information about working on and leading virtual teams are readily available, mostly because virtual teams are quickly becoming one of the most common ways people work together on short-term projects or as intact

teams for national or global companies. What makes this book unique is that I look at the world of virtual teams from a holistic perspective; I walk you through the steps of considering virtual teams as a business strategy, understanding why they're good for the planet and people, starting your career as a remote worker, making technology decisions that align with your team values, setting up and leading your global virtual team, and more.

This handy guide answers many questions and concerns that are unique to virtual teams such as:

- » How do you interview candidates properly when you aren't face-to-face?
- » How do you instill a sense of team when working globally?
- » How do you build cross-cultural IQ and appreciation?
- » How do you ensure team members feel like part of the company and fit into the corporate culture?
- » How do you implement training across oceans, cultures, and languages?
- » How do you prepare managers to supervise and lead a team they've never met face-to-face?
- » How do you position yourself and your skills to get hired for a remote opportunity?

When reading this book, keep an open mind for the subtle, yet unique challenges that virtual teams create. Of course, some common practices build trust and cohesion on teams regardless if they work in the same office or on a virtual team, but some of those common practices need more focus, priority, and time when working virtually. A few of the top virtual team nuances that I cover in this book include:

- » **Communication:** Although communication and engagement are common challenges for any team, differences in time zones and lack of face-to-face interactions contribute to the unique challenges of working virtually.
- » **Face-to-face meetings:** Virtual teams who get together in person regularly are able to realize peak effectiveness. However, for teams who are unable to do so because of budgetary or geographic restrictions, technology offers strategies for bringing teams together face-to-face.
- » **Accountability:** Creating accountability, even for a virtual team, is critical for team success. A variety of feedback tools can help team members with continuous feedback on responsiveness, communication, workload, participation level, and engagement.

- » **Training on technology:** Virtual teams need extensive training on the tech tools that keep them connected. They need full mastery of the technology in order to realize the benefits of virtual team effectiveness and productivity.
- » **Agreements:** Virtual teams that set standards for how they work together and have strong levels of trust are more likely to be effective.
- » **Connection:** Establishing connection and building trust virtually takes a commitment of time and attention by the team leader and all team members.
- » **Cultural IQ:** Virtual teams need expert guidance and training on an ongoing basis and *during every step of their development* from start-up to maturity in order to establish sensitivity and understanding around language and cultural differences.

Finally, throughout this book, I include interviews with companies and people who are doing remarkable work with virtual teams, so be sure to read the sidebar interviews for some juicy thought leadership.

Foolish Assumptions

I make some assumptions about you, the reader, and the help you're looking for. I assumed that you are either:

- » An executive interested in discovering the pros and cons about virtual teams and making a decision about using them in your business.
- » A virtual team leader already in the role or moving toward managing a virtual team for the first time and looking for support and coaching on how to do it successfully.
- » A virtual team member or wannabe remote worker who:
 - Desperately wants to create a virtual work arrangement with your current employer, but you're afraid it will never happen
 - Is searching for your next virtual gig and need tips for improving your online presence
 - Has specialized skills and is looking for work on a global project team
 - Is interested in how to bring ideas to your team to build more trust and cohesion

If you fit any of these descriptions, then the practical and applicable tips, tools, and resources in this book will be immediately helpful.

Icons Used in This Book

Like any *For Dummies* book, I place helpful icons that alert you to something you don't want to miss. Here is what the icons mean:



TIP

These are best practices or steps that you want to consider using and implementing to have a successful virtual work experience.



REMEMBER

This icon marks essential information that you don't want to forget.



WARNING

Be aware of and avoid these common pitfalls.

Where to Go from Here

If you've read a *For Dummies* book before, you know that it's written in a modular format, which means that you can read any chapter that meets your need at the time and get valuable information that can help you, rather than reading the book cover to cover. If you're unsure of where to start, I suggest you start reading from the beginning to discover all the aspects, benefits, and challenges of virtual teams regardless of your position, issue, or situation.

If you're unsure, allow me to offer some suggestions. Depending on your interest in virtual teams, you may find that different chapters benefit you more than others. For example, if you're considering virtual teams for your business or starting your career as a remote worker, then Part 1 on getting started is exactly what you need. If you're launching your first virtual team, reading Part 2 on building a strong team is essential. Everything you need to know about building a strong team culture is in Part 3. If you're interested in the best ideas for building engagement, trust, and collaboration on your virtual team, then Part 4 is the place to go. Don't miss best practices for managing your virtual team in Part 5.

You don't have to read every chapter in the book to get value. Rather, use the table of contents and index as your guides for where to go next. I hope that this book provides you with the tools and techniques you need to make virtual teams and virtual work an important part of your life and your company.

You can also check out the book's Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com. Just search "virtual teams" for more information to help you in your future endeavors with virtual teams.

1 Getting Started with Virtual Teams

IN THIS PART . . .

Explore the reasons for the phenomenal rise of virtual teams and remote work around the world.

Consider the pros and cons of using remote workers and virtual teams in your company.

Discover how to set up your virtual team business strategy and prepare your leaders and teams for this new way of work.

Get tips on how to dive into a career as a remote employee, including setting up your virtual office and building your personal brand.

Understand the big picture of what it takes to set up your virtual teams for success.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Acknowledging the rise of virtual teams
- » Defining virtual teams
- » Weighing the pros and cons of going virtual
- » Considering going virtual as a career move
- » Putting together a virtual team
- » Leading a virtual team

Chapter **1**

The Big Picture of Virtual Teams

Companies around the world are currently experiencing one of the greatest shifts in how work gets done around the world. It impacts the way people connect, the way teams communicate, the way leaders build relationships, and the way organizations accomplish results. It can be a positive change for people, the planet, and company profits if approached mindfully and designed to embrace technology, prioritize communication and relationships, and support a strong appreciation of culture and diversity. This transformation is the rise of the virtual team.

In the global marketplace, people can work practically anywhere and anytime. Virtual teams cut across the boundaries of time, space, culture, and sometimes organizations. In fact, every single day more companies are relying on virtual teams to achieve significant business results. Rising costs, global locations, and advances in technology are top reasons why virtual teams have increased by 800 percent worldwide over the past five years alone. Some sources now estimate that more than a billion people will work virtually in the next few years. According to the World Economic Forum, virtual work is one of the biggest drivers of

transformation in the workplace, and everyday new collaborative software, videoconferencing, and online project management software is being released for you and I to consume. Remarkably, the majority of virtual team leaders and team members have been given little to no preparation to work in this complex and diverse environment that creates a vast opportunity for supporting companies, leaders, and teams who are moving toward this diverse reality.

This chapter gives you a broad overview of virtual teams, including the variety of ways they are defined as well as emerging technology that is having an impact. I take a high-level look at the pros and cons of virtual teams and help you to think about whether or not working on a virtual team is a career option you want to consider. If you're a company or leader preparing to lead a virtual team, this chapter can provide a head start into the virtual world.

Embracing the New Virtual Team Reality

All aboard! The proverbial virtual team train has left the station and there's no going back. Many organizations are using virtual or dispersed teams to reduce costs, connect talent across geographical boundaries, manage global projects, and improve productivity and collaboration. Not to mention that going virtual is a huge boon for corporate sustainability efforts — reducing greenhouse gases, gasoline consumption, and pollution. Virtual work also means that people can work from anywhere, anytime, which can help unemployment rates among the disabled, military families, people with special needs, and people living in places where a once-booming industry has disappeared, such as coal mining, auto manufacturing, steel, textiles, and more.

The use of virtual teams is continuing to grow and companies around the world must recognize the unique challenges of virtual teams and invest in ongoing training and support to realize the benefits. If managed well, you can expect virtual teams to be highly engaged, accountable, successful at collaborative brainstorming, goal setting, problem solving, and planning. These sections explain the reasons for virtual team growth and the global impacts that they have on the workplace.

Why virtual teams are rapidly growing

What's really happening that is causing virtual teams to quickly become such a natural part of the workplace today? The following looks at it from a couple different viewpoints:



REMEMBER

» **Employer:** Virtual workers will save your company a whole lot of money, on everything from reduced sick time and absenteeism due to weather to office maintenance expenses. Refer to Chapter 2 for more discussion on the wide array of savings.

Access to talent is another reason many employers are going the virtual route. When you need specialized knowledge or experience that you can't find in your local talent pool, virtual work opportunities allow you to recruit anywhere in the world. Talk about competitive advantage!

» **Employee:** Many employees have demands that require them to spend hours commuting to work. They end up missing their kids' activities and don't have time for self-care or work-life balance. As a result, they have high levels of stress, sickness, and burnout, which is why more than 85 percent of employees have reported they want to work remotely even if it's part time. Virtual workers can get more done in less time because they can focus with limited interruptions during the workday. In return, they feel a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and happiness at the end each day. See Chapter 3 for more information on the benefits of working virtually.

Furthermore, recessions, layoffs, outsourcing, and downsizing prompt employees to hang out their shingle and start their own business to avoid bankruptcy and pay their bills. Many quickly find that they enjoy the benefits of being on their own — when they work, how they work, with whom they work, and what they work on. Many never go back to the traditional workplace; rather, they become teleworkers or flexible workers who can perform their jobs from anywhere in the world.

» **Technology:** Advances in technology and the ability to connect with people from around the world in an instant are important reasons why virtual work is thriving. Collaborative technology enables you to reach out and connect with your team in a variety of different ways, in any given moment, for any reason. Chapter 16 discusses advances in technology and what technology you need on your team.

Globalization effect

Globalization enables companies to expand their operations internationally. Globalization benefits companies in a variety of ways. Globalization:

- » Expands their customer base around the world
- » Lengthens the popularity of a trend or product (what's hot in the UK may already be an established product in Asia)
- » Spreads out economic risk

- »» Helps companies to test and expand in new markets
- »» Provides access to international talent
- »» Makes distribution less expensive
- »» Helps companies manage seasonal fluctuations

VIRTUAL TEAMS — AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

You may think that the concept of virtual teams is relatively new, but you'd only be partly right. Sure, technological advances, the Internet, and the global workforce created conditions for virtual teams to explode in recent years, but virtual teams have been around for centuries.

Think of it this way: Basically any team that worked together to accomplish anything from separate locations has operated virtually. From the complex multicultural expanse of the Roman Empire to the critical transportation of the Wells Fargo stagecoaches, teams have been geographically dispersed and highly effective for a long time.

Even the concept of working from home isn't new. Farmers, bakers, seamstresses, shoemakers, potters, weavers, and blacksmiths have always worked from their homes. The Industrial Revolution pulled many workers out of their homes and into factories. In the early 20th century, widespread electricity and public transportation drove workers into offices equipped with telephones, telegraphs, and typewriters.

In the 1970s, the OPEC oil crisis and rising fuel costs led Jack Niles (sometimes called The Father of Teleworking) to look for ways to reduce the cost of commuting. He conducted the first formal tests of telecommuting and coined the term *telecommuting* in his book *The Telecommunications-Transportation Tradeoff*. Telecommuting grew rapidly from there. In the 1980s, J.C. Penney began hiring home-based call center agents. The Clean Air Act of 1990 led many large businesses to offer telecommuting, and the National Telecommuting Initiative was created in 1996 with the federal government confirming its support for telecommuting.

Throughout the 20th century, new technologies have fueled the rise in telework and virtual teams. It began with surging sales of PCs, followed by cellular phones, voice mail, and of course that whole Internet thing. All of these factors paved the way for the virtual workplace known today. By the early 21st century, people who worked at least one day at home per week increased by more than 4 million, and today nearly half of working Americans say they spend at least some time working remotely. All signs indicate virtual work will continue to grow.

Today companies have personal and professional relationships that span the globe and are necessary for economic well-being and growth. In order to meet customer needs and demands and access specialized talent, products, and materials, building global teams that work together to accomplish results just makes smart business sense.



WARNING

However, having team members located in different time zones using different languages and living in different cultures, creates unique challenges and opportunities. See Chapter 9 for more information.

Generational worker shift

The workforce is changing. Baby boomers are retiring in droves, and Generation X isn't far behind. By 2025, Millennials who are comfortable working, communicating, socializing, and developing relationships with people located on the other side of the planet, will comprise 75 percent of the global workforce, and members of Generation Z are just beginning to start their careers. It's important to understand that both Millennials and Gen Zers are used to collaborating, getting answers, and solving problems alone or in groups over the Internet. So, it shouldn't come as a surprise then that working in a remote and virtual environment is a no-brainer for these generations and will cause this trend to continue upward for years into the future. Check out Chapter 9 where I discuss in more detail how different generations feel about and work on virtual teams.

Sorting Out Virtual Team Concepts

All this talk of virtual teams can be confusing, especially when people use different terms to describe virtual working arrangements. The following sections preview the different ways that virtual teams or remote work can be defined and provide some basic insight into each term:

- » **Geographically dispersed team:** A virtual team employs people who are usually dispersed or distributed around a city, a country, or the world. These dispersed teams work together from different locations and then rely on technology to connect them. They're also referred to as *dispersed teams* or *distributed teams*.
- » **Global versus local virtual team:** If you have a global virtual team, members are located in different countries and cities all over the world. If your virtual team is local, most likely your team is located in a similar area perhaps in the United States, or local to your own city such as Boulder, Colorado.

- » **Telecommuting:** Some virtual team members acknowledge themselves as telecommuters or say that they telecommute for their job. This basically means they're working from home or a location close to their home. *Telecommuting* defines a working arrangement in which the employee doesn't work in the office 100 percent of the time. For example, he can work from a home office, co-working space, coffee shop, or library, and he commutes via technology.
- » **Hoteling:** Another common remote work term that has been around for close to 20 years is *hoteling*. This describes the practice of providing as-needed, reservation-based office space that is unassigned rather than a permanent workspace. Companies that have outgrown their office space and don't want to purchase or rent more property use *hoteling* as a way to make more efficient use of their office space and keep costs to a minimum. *Hoteling* is also a helpful remote working arrangement if you have employees who travel frequently and only need to come into the office occasionally.
- » **Global outsourcing:** If your team needs a quick turnaround by someone who is an expert in design, transcription, development, marketing, e-learning, websites, SEO, and other easily outsourced tasks, global outsourcing can be a great fit. This is yet another form of virtual work and companies like Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer continue to grow as popular options for teams that need to supplement skill sets quickly.



REMEMBER

Global outsourcing isn't just for quick turnaround jobs. Companies may outsource longer-term assignments to workers in other countries to assist on a particular project that requires skills, language proficiency, or education that may be too difficult or too expensive to find locally.

- » **Flex jobs:** Many websites are dedicated to remote workers looking for a flexible type of job arrangement or a short-term, contract opportunity with a company. These remote workers may only want part-time work or work for a few months. They also may desire a flexible job arrangement where they're telecommuting occasionally, on call certain days of the week, or working remotely 100 percent of the time.

Understanding the Benefits and Challenges

In 2016, I launched a research study to validate and test the theory that the pros of having a virtual team and business outweigh the cons. This study included input from close to 200 executives, virtual team leaders, and team members from

a mix of industries in Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and small business. The study gathered insights about what makes a virtual team effective and challenges that virtual teams face. I highlight a few of the key findings here.

Noting virtual benefits

Based on my research, virtual team members, leaders, and executives all agree that a main benefit of virtual teams is to promote work-life balance as illustrated in Figure 1-1. Team members and team leaders also see virtual teams as a way to increase productivity, whereas executives view virtual teams as a cost-saving measure and a good way to get the right people to work together regardless of location.

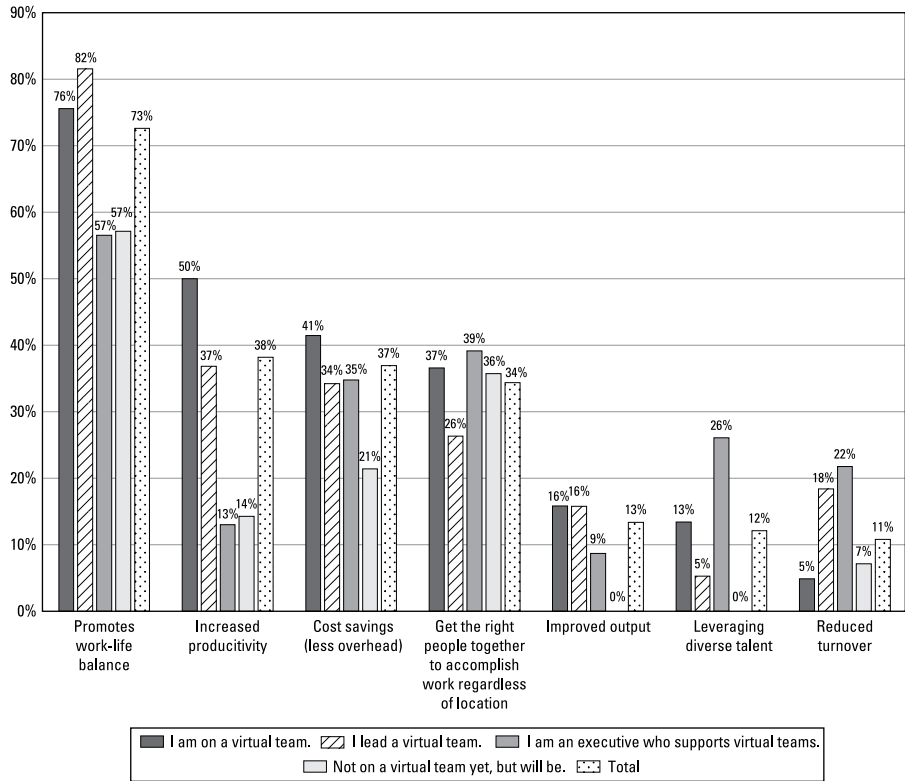


FIGURE 1-1:
Greatest benefits of virtual teams.

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Two-thirds of team leaders and half of all executives surveyed said that they estimate virtual teams are currently saving them costs equivalent to 16 to 25 percent of their revenue as Table 1-1 highlights. In a large company, that can equate to millions even billions of dollars in cost savings.

TABLE 1-1 Cost Savings as a Percentage of Revenue

Cost savings as a percentage of revenue	Team leader estimate of cost savings	Executive estimate of cost savings
0%	6%	7%
1-5%	17%	7%
6-15%	11%	27%
16-25%	67%	53%
26-50%	0%	4.3%

Refer to Chapter 2 for more discussion on the different pros to going the virtual-team route.

Considering virtual drawbacks

The trust factor is certainly a drawback for virtual team leaders. Blindly trusting virtual employee to do what they say they'll do, in a timely fashion, with an attention to quality, all without being able to personally check in and watch over their work on a daily basis is difficult for some leaders.

My research uncovered other common challenges. These challenges differed if the team was newly formed versus an established virtual team as Figures 1-2 and 1-3 show. The greatest challenge for newly formed virtual teams was figuring out how to effectively use technology and defining how best to communicate. Virtual team leaders also indicated that they struggled with getting the resources they needed to support the team.

After the virtual teams are established, keeping the team engaged and motivated is by far the greatest challenge, along with how to communicate effectively and unlock the team's creativity.

You have to think about several others things when deciding to go virtual in your business, including cybersecurity issues, Internet accessibility, connectivity speeds, confidentiality, and more. Chapter 2 covers these cons in greater detail.