



# Virtual Teams/Virtual Meetings

A WHITE PAPER PROVIDED TO ASPE BY ROB SNOWDEN

# Virtual Teams/Virtual Meetings

*A white paper prepared for ASPE by Rob Snowden  
Including links to free virtual meeting tools and resources*

## What is a virtual team?

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A group of individuals who work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technology.

They have complimentary skills, and are committed to a common purpose, have interdependent performance goals, and share an approach to work for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

They can be either organizationally aligned or project aligned.

## Why are virtual teams exploding?

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1. The best employees are anywhere
2. Workers demand flexibility.
3. Mergers and acquisitions
4. A flexible organization is more competitive and responsive to the marketplace.
5. Cost sensitivity – it's cheaper than moving people
6. Trusted workers tend to be more productive
7. The increasing globalization of trade and corporate activity
8. The global workday is 24 vs. 8 hours.
9. The US workday is 11 vs. 8 hours
10. Changes in workers' expectations of organizational participation
11. A continued shift from production to service/knowledge work environments
12. Increasing horizontal organizational structures characterized by structurally and geographically distributed human resources.
13. The technology exists (but sometimes not used very well) to make effective coordination possible.

## What also is driving this phenomenon?

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According to the NBC nightly news of 3/15/07:

- **Workers want control:**
  - Major companies are starting to see a real value in giving large numbers of workers control — in some cases complete control — over when and where they work, as long as the work gets done. It seems to be affecting bottom lines for the better.

- **Attitudes about work have changed:**
  - "Work is something you do," says a finance manager with Best Buy. "It's not a place that you go to."
- **It's catching on:**
  - 70 percent of Best Buy corporate has people working elsewhere.
  - The company has invented a system called ROWE — Results Only Work Environment — in which you go to the office only when you want to. The end result — how much you get done — is all that matters.
  - At IBM, on any given day, 42 percent of the global workforce does not go to the workplace.
- **It helps morale**
  - Best Buy says productivity has jumped 35 percent, with turnover and low morale all but gone.
- **It saves money:**
  - Sun Microsystems saved some \$400 million in real estate costs by allowing nearly half of all employees to work anywhere they want. At IBM, on any given day 42 percent of the global workforce does not go to the workplace.

### What are the challenges of virtual teams?

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1. Accents
2. Cultures
3. Different building
4. Different city
5. Different state
6. Different country
7. Different time-zone
8. Can't tell if they're productive
9. Can't find them easily
10. Can't get timely response
11. Can't tell if they're working
12. Don't deliver what they said
13. Collaboration difficult

### What are the challenges of virtual meetings?

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1. Accents
2. Cultures
3. Different location
4. Different time zone
5. Can't tell who's talking
6. Can't tell who has come on/ off call
7. Background noises – airport, kid crying, dogs barking

8. Can't tell if they're paying attention
9. Can't tell if they're multitasking
10. Can't see facial expression/ gestures
11. Collaboration difficult

### How do virtual teams differ from co-located teams?

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	Myth	Reality
1	Not as effective	Can match or exceed for some tasks with advantages in some areas – i.e. brainstorming = not as locked in.
2	Less preferable than co-located teams	Face-to-face not always the most effective – consider personal or cultural differences. Consider how you form opinions subtly on “style” like who hangs out with whom, what they drive, how they dress, what their cube looks like, their apparent work habits (they look busy), etc.
3	Team dynamics are pretty much the same	Virtual teams develop differently and therefore have different dynamics – i.e. socialization, no body language.
4	Can't develop trust	Can be as quick with high focus on communication and interaction. Team needs to define trust and behaviors it would take to build it.
5	No accountability	Must be based on measurable outcomes. Shift to results-oriented paradigm.
6	Blame the technology	Blame “soft skills” first. Virtual Teams use technology to make things better.
7	No difference in roles	Roles are different especially concerning disciplined interaction and communication. Expect to spend more time on the phone – it's a necessity.

### What are the critical success factors of Virtual Teams?

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1. Conscious ‘informality’ approaches
  - Identify things you can do that simulate bumping into someone in the hall, dropping something off at their desk, chitchatting about non-work topics, etc.
2. Availability standards
  - Since you can't go looking for them, establish rules for availability.
3. Budget for technology – it's cheap in comparison
  - A small technology investment reaps huge rewards if they are adequately used.

4. Corporate memory systems – Databases
5. Written goals and objectives
  - With call centers, the number of calls per hour and other metrics are easy measures of performance. With professionals, it's more difficult but it is possible.
6. Performance metrics
  - See above.
7. Team communication orchestration
  - Don't over copy/under communicate
  - Avoid email avalanches
8. HR Policies for virtual teams that do not favor those co-located
  - Reward/recognition programs
  - Career development
9. Access to training methods to accommodate the virtual team
10. Standard and agreed upon technical and soft team processes
  - Teleconference ground rules
  - Ways you will behave on calls, availability, etc.
11. A "high trust" culture: teamwork and collaboration are the norm
12. Software applications that support teamwork and collaboration consensus building
13. Leaders set high performance expectations and model behaviors such as working across boundaries and using technology effectively
14. Leaders and members exhibit competence in working in virtual environments
15. An understanding of cultural differences.
  - New York vs. Alabama as well as the U.S. vs. offshore

### What are some things I can do to build trust?

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1. Show respect for their opinions
2. Help team members focus on problem vs. blame
3. Be a role model of constructive behavior
  - a. Maintain constructive relationships
  - b. Take initiative to make things better
  - c. Lead by example
4. Focus on why trust is important
5. Build in time to allow people to know each other
6. Meet face-to-face early in development cycle to allow for relationship-building
7. Set up weekly ½ hour 1:1's or 10:10's (10 min. for you, 10 min. for me)
8. DWYSYWD – Do what you say you will do
9. Stand behind the team – never talk negatively in public about the team
10. Establish clear policies on communication

## What are some team leader skills needed?

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1. Facilitate meetings (face-to-face, on-line, video, audio) – setting the correct tone.
2. Coach and mentor team members in virtual environment
3. Provide ongoing performance feedback and generalized “attaboys” as needed.
4. Align team initiatives with organizational needs – tie the team’s contributions to organizational values and objectives
5. Technical proficiency
6. Project and program management – don’t over commit team
7. “Transitionization” that positively enhances careers
8. Manage by getting commitments you can measure against
9. Spend 75% of attention on team members not at your site
10. Understand/facilitate team development states and dynamics
11. Model virtual behaviors of working across time, space, culture
12. Networks with virtual customers and stakeholders
13. Ooze integrity, competence and benevolence
14. Strive for continuous improvement of leadership skills
15. Early identification of team dysfunction and take corrective action.
16. Ensure that distant team members are made to feel a part of the team
17. Provide timely feedback to all
18. Ensure team processes do not favor those nearby (i.e. allow electronic submission of expense reports)
19. Ensure reward and recognition programs are fair to those near and far
20. Start with face mail right from the start, then move to other modes
21. Arrange your calendar to ensure you can make all meetings
22. Build in processes for easy collaboration and review of work
23. Establish status process for review of progress and be consistent – nothing is better than the fear of having to say, “I didn’t complete it” in a conference call.

## What are some guidelines for running virtual meetings with my team?

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1. ID yourself when talking
2. Notify if you are coming or going
3. Place on mute when not speaking
4. Do not use cell phones unless you can mute them
5. If you must use speaker phones, everyone must sit near the phone
6. One conversation at time – facilitator intervenes
7. Stay on topic
8. Absence/silence is agreement
9. Minimize slang and speak slowly and clearly
10. Be conscious of time zone differences when scheduling meetings – rotate inconvenience

11. Be conscious of mental states based on the particular time zones involved – end of day, late at night, bright and early, etc.
12. Build in processes to accommodate different styles and personalities.
13. Plan well, structure the meetings well.
14. Use some sort of meeting software – ensure everyone can see the same thing.
15. Time box discussions so people are free to multitask at different times.
16. Ensure the logistics are set up ahead of time and that all systems are working.
17. Become very familiar with the software you use to avoid problems.
18. Make web meetings the norm – have all parties viewing one person’s screen to capture and reflect the topics being discussed, and the decisions/assignments.
  - It can be as simple as a Word document, or using one of the products listed below.
  - MindManager by Mindjet.com is a recommended option.

## **What are some products to use for teleconferences that I can test drive?**

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### **1. Meetingworks FREE DOWNLOAD FOR UP TO 5 PARTICIPANTS**

*Meetingworks is a powerful electronic meeting software package that enhances collaboration, decision-making, and productivity in facilitated meetings. Participants use PC’s connected by LAN or Internet to brainstorm, prioritize, and reach consensus in an enjoyable meeting environment enhanced by instant documentation, file transfer, chat, and presentations. Participants can be located face-to-face or anywhere in the world.*

Contact: Cheryl Lamka

Phone: 206.467.1234 x 206

Email: [info@meetingworks.com](mailto:info@meetingworks.com)

Web: [www.meetingworks.com](http://www.meetingworks.com)

### **2. Freemind FREE OPEN SOURCE**

*FreeMind is premier free software written in Java. The recent development has hopefully turned it into high productivity tool. We are proud that the operation and navigation of FreeMind is faster than that of MindManager because of one-click "fold / unfold" and "follow link" operations.*

Web: [http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)

### **3. MindManager FREE 21 Day Download**

*Mindjet MindManager 7 is the market leading productivity software for visualizing and managing information, allowing individuals and teams to more effectively think, plan, and collaborate.*

Email: [sales@mindjet.com](mailto:sales@mindjet.com)

Web: <http://www.mindjet.com/us/>