

Virtual Performance: *Harvesting the Power of Virtual Teams*

By Jerry Manas, PMP

Ever wonder which common virtual team member behavior can lower a person's IQ more than going without a night's sleep – and even more than smoking marijuana?

“Huh?” you reply.

When Creating WE Institute colleagues Peg Aldridge, an innovation specialist, along with communication expert Nancy Ring and I began our research into what fosters virtual team performance, we never dreamt our work would relate to marijuana in any way. Yet, research funded by Hewlett-Packard and conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of London shows that multitasking lowers a person's IQ by a whopping ten points, while losing a night's sleep costs just an eight point decline, and being high on marijuana results in a mere four point drop.

With this in mind ...

- How many of us multitask during our virtual team meetings? and
- How does that impact our team's ability to meet its performance goals?

The effect of multitasking is just one of many variables my colleagues and I are trying to uncover in our research of virtual teams and the accompanying survey. This article relays some of what we've learned from our research and our many years of diverse experience and observations, and what we hope to uncover in our survey. If you'd like to join in the fun, please do so by taking the survey at:

<http://www.infotool-online.net/Brochure/en/login.asp>

ID: VT survey

Password: team

Those who participate will be invited to a webinar relaying the results of the survey. A participant in our pilot phase reported learning a lot simply taking the survey, and we trust you too will find your 20-minute investment worthwhile. After all, it looks like virtual teams are here to stay...

Virtual Teams: A New Reality

Virtual teams aren't just an option any more; they are a necessity. We know that the need to work virtually---and be successful at it---is expanding exponentially due to a wide variety of increasing trends:

- Telecommuting and other flexible work environments
- Innovative practices requiring expertise of cross-functional members of geographically disbursed teams
- Offshoring/outsourcing of project components and certain functions
- Increasing travel restrictions due to cost and time
- Consolidating markets/mergers requiring cross-organizational work
- Global expansion requiring collaboration across geographies
- Matrixed organizations requiring collaboration across departments and locations
- Reduction of brick and mortar expense

All of these trends have one thing in common: *the requirement for people who are not co-located to work together toward a common purpose*. Our shared experience tells us that geographic distance presents special challenges. The objective of our survey, therefore, is to learn what successful virtual teams are doing to overcome those challenges. We need to start, however, by defining the phrase *virtual team*.

Virtual Teams Defined

Before we can examine the factors that lead to high performing virtual teams, we need to acknowledge that there are numerous perceptions of what a *virtual team* is (or what a *team* is, for that matter). First, the word *team* implies a shared objective that requires the interaction and collaboration of all members in some way in order to reach the objective. Think of a sports team that depends on all players to do their part, or a project team in which each team member contributes their expertise toward the project's objective.

If the members are merely doing similar work, and can just as easily accomplish their objectives independent of the other members, then they are working as a *group*, not a team. It is quite possible to work as a team when interaction is required, and as a group when interaction is not required. The key is to understand the difference, and know when team principles apply.

A *virtual team*, therefore, is a team in which some or all of the members whose contributions are necessary for overall success are not co-located. They could be in different countries, different buildings, or simply different floors.

Meeting team goals requires interaction, and members are dependent on each other to get things done.

The Challenges of Geography and Technology

Vital team success factors such as alignment, commitment, productivity, trust, and engagement are challenging enough when we're all in the same room, and they are especially so with virtual teams. Our experience tells us that correct application of the three performance levers---engagement, governance, and enabling technology---can help address these challenges and drive high performance. Those levers can help us answer important questions like:

- How do we ensure everyone is engaged and accountable for their work?
- Does breaking a large virtual team into sub-teams increase performance?
- What level of governance is appropriate to avoid chaos and ensure that common principles are observed?
- What technology is available for collaboration, and how is it best leveraged?
- Which elements of success are most vital?
- Which success factors should virtual teams address first?
- Where do organizations most commonly struggle, and how critical are the areas they struggle with?
- Are there consistent success factors across all cultures, geographies, and industries, or are some areas unique?
- What role does gender, age, or job function play, if any?
- Which emerging technologies are most useful, and for what purposes?

Yes, virtual teams generally mean more technology. Frequently considered the answer to the challenge of geography, emerging technology---and how to best leverage it---often adds to the confusion. The results of this survey will show us which technologies actually enhance virtual team productivity:

- Social networks?
- Wikis?
- Blogs?
- Mobile alerts (e.g. Twitter)?
- Virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life)?

We believe survey results in the domain of emerging technology will be especially important. In our experience, many organizations either have no idea how to use these technologies, or worse---they ignore their social aspects and treat them as simple technology implementations. Not surprisingly,

when this happens, adoption is sporadic, the technology falls into disuse, and a great deal of money and time is wasted.

The Promise of Virtual Teams

If the challenges of virtual teams are high, the rewards are high as well. We now can leverage a broader array of cross-functional expertise, and bring together groups of people from multiple geographies, companies, and functions. When virtual teams are working effectively, we gain both delivery speed and reduced travel expenses. With virtual teams, we also can improve morale as we provide increasingly flexible work environments. Indeed, as more organizations offer such flexibility, it is fast becoming the expected norm—and a requirement for attracting and retaining the best people.

Undoubtedly, organizations that understand the challenges, avoid the pitfalls, and exploit the benefits of virtual teams will be ahead of the curve and best prepared for scalable, long-term success.

Your Chance to Participate – Take the Survey!

By increasing engagement; applying lean, but adequate governance; and embracing emerging technology, it is clear from experience, observation, and current literature, that virtual team productivity can be significantly improved---not to mention that greater retention of top talent can be achieved.

The invitation still stands. If you would like to participate in this important survey, and have access to the published results and accompanying online event, simply follow this link and enter the Login ID and password shown below:

<http://www.infotool-online.net/Brochure/en/login.asp>

ID: VT survey

Password: team

On behalf of Gantthead, The Marengo Group, and The Communication Partnership Ltd., co-sponsors of the survey, your input will be greatly appreciated.

Jerry Manas is President of the Marengo Group, and author of *Managing the Gray Areas* (RMC Publications, January 2008) and *Napoleon on Project Management* (Nelson Business, April 2006). Through the Marengo Group, Jerry helps project and virtual teams achieve high performance using techniques and practices that result in greater alignment, leaner processes, and more strategic use of technology. Jerry is a founding member of *The Creating We Institute* (www.creatingweinstitute.com) and co-founder of *PMThink!* (www.pmthink.com), a popular project management blog site. Visit his website at www.marengogroup.com.

