

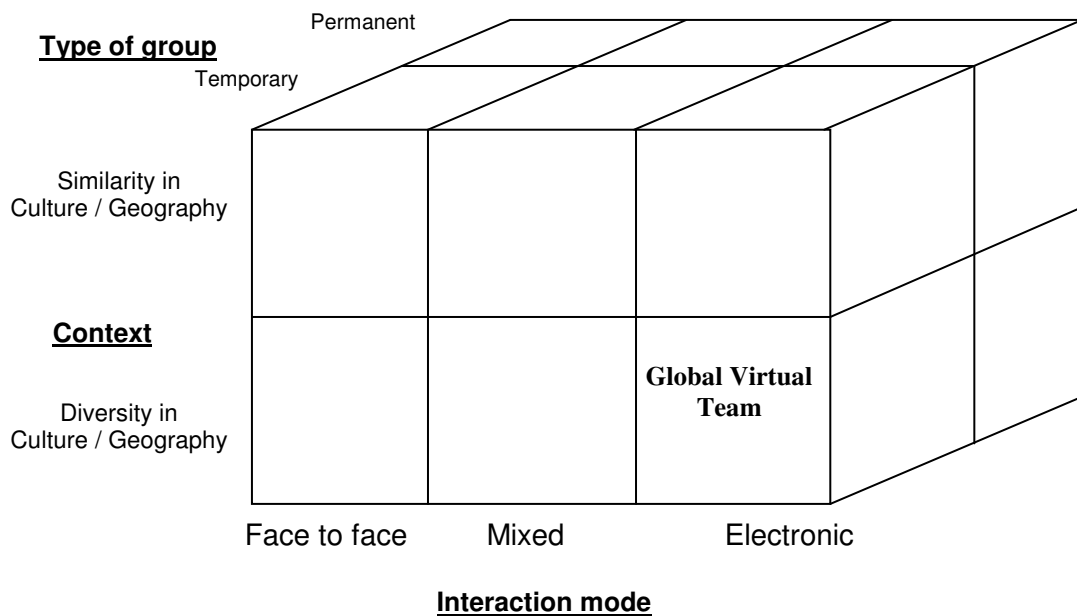
## Teams of the Future

*“In the good old days we were all from the same organisation, collocated, permanent, working 100% on the project and had a clearly defined team leader. Today team members are spread throughout the world, within different organisations, are members of multiple teams, work part-time on the project and have multiple reporting lines with different parts of the organisation.” A nightmare? No, it’s simply a virtual team!*

### What do we mean by a virtual team?

There are many types of teams, ranging from the traditional team (full-time, permanent, co-located, mono-cultural) through to the global virtual team, passing through the local team, the matrix team, the organisational team, the internal/external network, the distant team, etc.

We use the definition of Kristof to define a global virtual team as “a temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, electronically communicating work group” (see figure below).



**Figure 1 Global Virtual Team**

In reality there are few truly virtual teams, most virtual teams are more or less diverse in culture, more or less permanent and use a mix of face to face and electronic communications.

### What do virtual teams do?

Many manage projects. They are created around a specific task with team members being selected based on their expertise in relation to the task or project. In general these teams are created for the life of the project and are then disbanded.

Some manage specific functions or divisions within an organisation. Here team members are selected due to their position within the organisation.

Others simply share experiences and knowledge, membership is voluntary and members generally come from within the same profession. These types of teams are more focussed on learning rather than providing some form of “deliverable”.

### **A paradigm shift in management style:**

#### **Managing a virtual team requires a mindset which must change:**

<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>
Face-to-face is the best environment for interaction, anything else is a compromise	Different kinds of environments can support high quality interactions. What matters is how you use them
Collaboration is what happens when teams interact at a fixed time and space	Collaboration happens in an ongoing way without boundaries
Being people-orientated is incompatible with using technology	Using technology in a people-orientated way is both possible and desirable
When communication processes breakdown, blame the technology	When the communication process breaks down, evaluate management and interaction strategies, not just the technical tool
Learning to manage virtual teams is about learning how to use the technology	Learning to manage virtual teams is about understanding more about teams and the collaboration process

#### **Key issues facing managers of virtual teams**

- Creating team identity
- Ensuring clarity of mission,
- Developing trust between team members
- Choosing the appropriate communication tools.

As said earlier, few virtual teams are 100% virtual. The time when the team is together is vital to creating both a team identity and developing relationships between individuals – still the basis for creating, or destroying, trust. This time is important and should not be wasted, early morning flights half way around the world to participate in a poorly prepared meeting that does more harm than good should be avoided.

A “kick-off” meeting or teambuilding event in the early days of the life of the team is essential to develop a common frame of reference and some basic ground rules. As Bruno Rambaud (Senior Vice-President of Thales Communications) said in a recent article *“I wanted a teambuilding seminar for my Executive Committee of senior American, Scandinavian, British and French managers, in order to create a common shared experience before getting down to detailed development plans”*. If you don’t do something similar early on, you will invariably have to do it later – at which time it will be more difficult and you will probably be well behind schedule!

Trust (defined as *“the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party”*) is an issue at the centre of the effective functioning of virtual teams, it is essential in order to reduce the high levels of uncertainty endemic to global, technological environments.

Virtual teams have only their mutual trust in one another as their guarantee for the success of their joint work. As Charles Handy says *“If we are to enjoy the efficiencies and other benefits of the virtual organisation, we will have to rediscover how to run organisations more on trust than on control. Virtuality requires trust to make it work, technology on its own is not enough.”*

Being spread throughout the organisation(s), working part-time on a number of projects and having other priorities means that team members need a clear understanding of the mission of the team, the role they play within that mission and what their deliverables are (when, where, to who, at what cost, etc.).

The way of communicating within a virtual team is, in general, far removed from the traditional face-to-face interpersonal communication associated with teams working in “the same place at the same time”. Telephone and/or video conferencing, email, discussion groups, chat (or chat rooms), team web sites, application sharing, web browsing etc, cannot be avoided if a durable, effective communication system is to be established.

<p><b>Same place (co-located)</b></p> <p><b>Same time (synchronous)</b></p> <p>Face-to face meetings</p> <p>Computer supported meetings</p>	<p><b>Different place (distributed)</b></p> <p><b>Same time (synchronous)</b></p> <p>Telephone conference calls</p> <p>Video conferencing</p>
<p><b>Same place (co-located)</b></p> <p><b>Different time (asynchronous)</b></p> <p>Message boards</p> <p>Resource centres</p> <p>Project offices</p>	<p><b>Different place (distributed)</b></p> <p><b>Different time (asynchronous)</b></p> <p>Voice/electronic mail</p> <p>Computer conferencing</p> <p>GroupWare (intranets)</p>

Effective communication is a key factor in the development of trust. In a virtual team the ‘clues’ that tell us whether communication is effective are largely missing, and one of the first principles in a virtual team is to set up, and agree at the early stages, exactly what communication processes will be adopted. For instance :-

- Match the technologies to the reality of both the infrastructure available and the “readiness” of team members to use the technology
- Work out a time schedule that is inclusive, and set realistic timeframes for document turnaround etc.
- Send regular information updates on what is happening.
- Lay the groundwork for what needs to be discussed during telephone or video conferences by previously sending information by fax or email, or by posting it on a web site.
- Have direct telephone lines and agree convenient times for calling.

## **Seven steps to managing effective virtual teams:**

### **1. Identify team members**

It's not so much about recruiting or selecting team members, it's more about identifying who contributes to the performance of the team and how they contribute.

### **2. Map relationships or interfaces**

You need to understand clearly who interacts with who and when they need to interact.

### **3. Create an identity**

Being spread throughout the organisation (or organisations), team members will seldom feel part of a team. Use the time when team members are physically together to create positive relationships and shared experiences. Try giving the team a name or creating a team web site.

### **4. Clarify mission**

As team members will invariably be working within other teams it is important to clarify the mission, objectives; "raison d'être" of your team, you need to set the boundary or scope of their work.

### **5. Identify deliverables**

Clear deliverables should be identified for both individuals and the team, together with "delivery" dates.

### **6. Implement appropriate technology**

Remember, technology, especially IT, is a possible answer or aid to communication problems, an over dependency on technology can push virtual teams into chaos when the technology fails to work

### **7. Don't let team members "vanish"**

It is very easy for team members to vanish, either willingly or unwillingly. Keep in contact, especially with the key team members.

In summary, think about the lifecycle of the team, start slowly establishing agreed ground rules, accelerating as the task and team become more familiar. Reinforce the achievements of the team, and recognise the successes and contributions from each team member In the final phase review and share the learning, providing motivation and a springboard to the next virtual experience.

Finally, if you thought that the introductory paragraph was a nightmare, imagine being a team member in the International Space Station, your team leader is in Houston, one of your colleagues is about to blast off from Baikonour in Russia and the repair team are on the way on the shuttle.....