As recently as just two decades ago, teams generally worked best when they were located in the same space. Today, thanks to globalisation and the rise of the Internet – as well as technologies such as email, Skype and Instant Messaging – time and distance are no longer an issue, and managers are leading teams spread over many countries.

For many organisations, working with geographically-dispersed teams has been driven by a shortage of skilled workers in their local areas, and virtual working helps them find the skills they need. For others, budget cuts may have triggered the need for a low-cost, flexible workforce. Virtual working has also become a valuable selling point for organisations wishing to attract and retain the best people.

However, although teleworking has quickly become commonplace, many managers fall short in knowing how to lead a geographically-dispersed team, and they are not fully equipped to work through the unique challenges that face these groups.

HR and training professionals have an important role to play here: working with both managers and team members to build the skills and establish the group dynamics needed for people to work together successfully, at a distance.

The role of leaders
In the past, it was assumed that leaders could only influence their people’s attitudes and behaviour through close, sustained contact. However, new research shows that, while excellent leadership, especially transformational leadership, will always be important, close contact isn’t as necessary as it was once thought.

James Manktelow explains how to get the best from a geographically-dispersed team

References
1 http://orgsci.highwire.org/content/20/1/240.short
According to research in *Organization Science*, leaders can significantly help their teams succeed by developing strong personal relationships with individual members. Transformational leadership – in which leaders develop and communicate a compelling vision of the future, and then work with team members to deliver it – is also important in helping individuals trust one another.

Leaders must clearly understand their role when it comes to guiding a geographically-dispersed team, and they must customise their leadership style to accommodate the unique needs and challenges of teleworkers. If they just use the same approach that they use with an in-office team, they are likely to fail miserably.

For example, roles and responsibilities are often loose and flexible in a traditional office setting and, sometimes, tasks or roles may even be shared. However, virtual team leaders need to provide a very clear direction on roles and responsibilities. Ambiguity can quickly lead to confusion, dissatisfaction and unmet goals.

Virtual leaders also need to encourage self-sufficiency and autonomy in their teams. They can’t and won’t always be available for help, so they must routinely make sure that everyone on the team has the information and resources they need to work independently and still accomplish their goals.

L&D professionals can help leaders throughout the organisation learn the skills they need to do this.

### Building an effective team

Studies published in the journal *Information & Management* show that the strongest indicators of virtual team success are good team processes and good relationships between team members. Again, L&D professionals can help managers and team members with these.

Team processes include how managers organise and co-ordinate work, set goals for people, communicate, manage group meetings, measure results and ensure that everyone is contributing fully. The quality of these processes has a direct effect on how successful your organisation’s teams will be. Managers can lay the foundations of good team processes in several ways, including creating team charters. These help to define everyone’s roles and responsibilities, decide how work will be managed and submitted, and confirm the team’s mission and objectives. The charter should also define the team’s level of authority, boundaries, resources, support, and operations on a day-to-day basis.

It can be challenging to find professionals who excel in all of the areas necessary for successful virtual work. For instance, you might find someone who’s a great communicator but is challenged by the technology needed to do his work. This is why it’s important to identify skill gaps and make sure that team members are trained to overcome weaknesses.

Trust is also an important part of building an effective team. Consider how long it can take to establish trust in a team of people who work together daily. When people are working remotely and are spread out across time zones, building trust takes even longer and becomes even more important.

Trust within a virtual team is initially built on reliability. These team members can’t draw upon relationships built during lunch breaks or informal chats, so, at the onset, they build trust by keeping their promises and submitting good quality work, on time and on budget.

However, there’s plenty more that managers can do to build trust and rapport in a dispersed team.

For example, set up an intranet page or team ‘room’ for each of your virtual teams. Ask everyone to write a short bio and include a picture. Give team members the ability, through a forum or blog, to share personal achievements, stories, or charity events they’re involved in.

Co-located teams often spend the first five or ten minutes of a meeting chatting and catching up; this time is important for building relationships and strengthening bonds. However, this may not happen with virtual teams. As such, leaders need to be trained to encourage this process and should make time for informal chats in some team meetings.

### Motivating a virtual team

A core part of managing a virtual team involves switching away from a mindset of managing people’s presence at work, and switching towards a mindset of managing completion of deliverables to a set quality, by a set time. If managers can make this switch, many of the possible problems of managing remote teamwork simply disappear.

However, motivation can still be a problem with virtual teams. Team members can quickly lose sight both of why they’re working together and of what they’re trying to accomplish. When this happens,
morale can drop and people can become disengaged. This is why it’s so important to train managers in how to motivate virtual team members.

Part of this involves encouraging managers to regularly communicate the team’s mission, goals and achievements. This can be in the form of a personal communication, through an email to everyone in the group, or via updates on the group’s team page. Managers can also use Fredrick Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory to motivate their team – while this was set out almost 50 years ago, it’s an enduring idea that is still useful and highly relevant today. What Herzberg discovered was that certain characteristics of a person’s job – such as achievement, recognition, the work itself and responsibility – are often related to job satisfaction, while other factors – including bureaucratic company policies, poor working conditions, low salaries and bad working relationships – are consistently associated with job dissatisfaction.

The key concept in Herzberg’s theory is that managers can’t just remove a factor of dissatisfaction and assume that this will make a person satisfied. They first have to remove dissatisfaction factors, and then enhance satisfaction factors. All of these must be addressed to create an engaged, productive team.

Unlike managers of co-located teams, managers of virtual teams can’t see if their people are looking stressed, glum or fed-up. This is why these managers need to work very hard to talk to their people to make sure they’re happy and feel appreciated. This is where it helps to have regular online meetings specifically focused on the relationship and nothing else.

While Herzberg’s theory will get your people a long way in motivating virtual team members, it can help to bring in other motivational theories as well. Dr David Sirota, an organisational researcher and consultant, created his three-factor theory of motivation after surveying more than four million workers around the globe. He argues that there are three important factors that influence motivation:

- **equity/fairness** – people want to be treated fairly at work
- **achievement** – people want to do important, useful work and be recognised for it
- **camaraderie** – people want to enjoy good relationships with their co-workers.

Sirota’s theory reminds managers of virtual teams to be absolutely transparent and fair in the way that they deal with people. It reminds them that people’s achievements need to be celebrated and that people need to be brought together with colleagues regularly – by online meeting, or, when possible, in person.

Lastly, celebrating wins is an important part of motivation, and this is a key concept in Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer’s Small Wins Theory. Amabile and Kramer discovered that when people consistently take small steps towards a goal and are recognised for the successful completion of each step, they’re more productive, engaged and creative.

Celebrating small wins with co-located teams is common and easy, because leaders understand how important it is to highlight everyone’s hard work. However, this important motivational practice often falls by the wayside with geographically-dispersed teams. While everyone can’t meet for lunch and cake in the break room, managers can celebrate small wins with a congratulatory email or a group video chat praising everyone’s accomplishments.

The importance of good communication

Excellent communication skills are exceptionally important when managing a virtual team, which is why this needs to be a key area of personal development for virtual team members and their managers.

When we communicate face-to-face, particularly on an emotional subject, a lot of our communication is non-verbal and incorporates body language and tone of voice. But communication through email or chat can quickly increase the odds of misunderstanding, because it relies solely on what is said, not how it’s said. And when one or both parties are poor communicators, those odds can rocket. Assumptions are made, or meanings are misinterpreted, and relationships can suffer badly as a result.

Everyone on a virtual team should have a thorough understanding of what good communication is and what it entails. This includes how to write clear, effective emails, and involves setting ground rules for courteous behaviour with others in meetings. It also includes intelligent use of emoticons, to clarify ambiguity and express the emotional intention behind messages.

Face-to-face meetings are also an important part of good communication and relationship-building. Videoconferencing technologies such as Skype or GoToMeeting make it easy to bring people together digitally, and this is especially important when solving complex problems or brainstorming.

Reference

3 http://onlinemba.unc.edu/research-and-insights/developing-real-skills-for-virtualeams/how-to-can-support-virtual-work-teams/
One of the key strengths of dispersed teams is their inherent diversity

It’s also very important for managers to give thorough, regular feedback. Keep in mind that virtual team members can’t read their manager’s body language, and they can’t easily or casually consult with others on the quality of their work. So they won’t know if they’re on track and they can’t improve unless leaders provide regular feedback on their progress.

Understanding cultural diversity
One of the key strengths of dispersed teams is their inherent diversity.

Cultural differences can include differences in beliefs, values, working styles, language, decision-making, preferences and priorities. They can also include whether team members feel that they can say ‘no’ to their managers, for example by saying that they can’t meet a certain deadline.

However, if team members lack cultural sensitivity, understanding and awareness, these differences can quickly turn into liabilities. According to a survey conducted by the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina in the United States, only 8 per cent of the HR professionals surveyed said they had provided cultural sensitivity training to virtual leaders.

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner’s Seven Dimension of Culture identifies seven categories of common cultural differences and can help teams better understand and appreciate their cultural differences. Put simply, people from various cultures are not just randomly different; they are different in very specific, often predictable, ways.

Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions model is also useful in cultural training. This model identifies five dimensions of cultural differences: power distance; individualism; masculinity; uncertainty avoidance; and long-term orientation. Awareness of each of these dimensions, as well as how specific countries score in each, can help people understand the differences between themselves and other members of their team. It can also help team members change the way they communicate, issue instructions and provide feedback to each other.

Tolerance and awareness should be encouraged during team meetings. Occasional, informal discussions, in which people take an interest in a team member’s culture, can help spark interest, create bonds and encourage tolerance.

Keep in mind that cultural differences also include observing important religious or cultural holidays. As such, it should be communicated to team members that certain groups or people will be off on specific days. Explaining why, as well as talking openly about the holiday or observance, can help spark curiosity and understanding.

Tolerance also applies to people’s attitudes and working styles, and these can be much more difficult to get to grips with for virtual teams than for co-located ones. Use psychometric tests like Myers-Briggs personality testing, the DiSC model or the Big Five Personality Traits model to help people understand one another’s characteristics and working styles. You can also use models like the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile and Belbin’s Team Roles to help people understand one another’s different natural team roles.

Conclusion
There’s every indication that the number of teleworkers will continue to grow. While there are many challenges for these professionals, as well as the people who lead them, there are also countless opportunities to achieve ambitious goals, develop a more flexible workforce, attract and retain good people, and create a better life-balance for all involved.

Training both leaders and team members is an essential aspect of helping these virtual teams live up to their potential. Managers need to be trained to manage virtual teams, including the specific additional motivation and communication challenges that come with team formation and team building. They also need to have an appreciation of the differences between people – whether cultural or individual – and enjoy and appreciate these differences.

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