EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES: Working in a Virtual Environment

UCSD EPSE Student Research Assignment 2012-13; Combined Findings
OUTLINE

- The Value of Research
- The Assignment
- Information Received
- Combined Findings
- Discussion
THE VALUE OF RESEARCH

- More aware of management challenges, and responses, at your organization

- Experience the process of seeking objective information and multiple viewpoints

- Contribute to better understanding of common practices across companies and industries
THE ASSIGNMENT

- Understand the challenge
  - Determine what factors most influence the success or failure of virtual work
  - Determine how an organization can best extol, teach, monitor and become proficient at those factors

- Gather information (literature, interviews, survey)

- Look for common themes

- Document findings, present best practices, give personal analysis and recommendations
INFORMATION RECEIVED

- Six team reports
  - 29 researchers
  - 13 science and technology companies
  - 45 interviews
  - 301 survey respondents
  - 45 literature citations

- Swift and professional effort in completing the project and producing coherent and useful reports (five weeks)
FINDINGS

- **Team 1**
  - **Advantages/Disadvantages to Virtual Work**
    - wider talent pool – specialized growth and productivity, also potential isolation and distrust
    - relationships/trust – customer, peer experience
    - work/life – potential boon or burden
    - management – high potential, high risk model
  - **Specific Skills Essential**
    - communication – frequent, open, clear
    - proficiency with relevant technical tools
    - self-motivation, take initiative
    - ability to see other’s perspective and be flexible
  - "Out of sight, out of mind... death of the virtual workgroup"
FINDINGS

Team 2

- Tested literature via survey and interview, also segmented by phases of a project life cycle

- Results
  - Use of/facility with technology tools is critical
  - Communication skills consistently ranked high
    - written especially at beginning, verbal as progresses
    - face-to-face time makes a big difference
  - Mature processes and procedures ranked high
    - “drumbeat” to meetings and practices
  - Cultural differences not a problem (may be subtle)
    - Also saw interpersonal conflict as not a problem
  - Generational/age biases could be explored
FINDINGS

Team 3

• Took a remediation approach – what are the risks (70% fail), how to mitigate them

• Factor and action
  
  Cooperation, trust
  • promote meaningful face-to-face time
  • approved behavioral norms
  • cross-cultural preparation

  Consistent understanding, engagement
  • careful group member selection
  • intense management – an every day job

  Productive tools
  • proactively select tools, forethought and situational
  • often feel constrained or under-supported
FINDINGS

- **Team 4**
  - Special survey analysis – experienced virtual workers vs. general respondents
    - Same emphasis on communication, organization and planning, technical tools, concerns about cultural sensitivity and the need for some face-to-face contact
    - Experienced group cited how challenging the VWE is in terms of *leadership*, and building *team competence*
    - Experienced group also cited the importance of skills like drive, energy, initiative, and active listening
  - **Intense management**
    - Probably takes more manager time, not less
    - How does your virtual team address communication challenges? – “it relies on the skills of the managers”
FINDINGS

Team 5

- Use data gathered to validate or invalidate views about virtual work
  - Only 10% felt a virtual workplace was more productive than a local one
  - Agree that communication is critical, but most said they interact less with the supervisor – and even co-workers – in the virtual environment
    - diminishes accountability
    - erodes trust and commitment
  - Uncertainty about how people were selected, little training or preparation makes progress slow
  - Widespread use of technology tools, not a problem
Team 6

- Looked at important behaviors and actions to support four specific factors of success
  - Fostering Communication (incl. technological)
    - need some periodic voice communication; video not essential
    - need desktop and work file sharing
  - Building Trust
    - personal accountability is the best method of building trust
    - up-front face-to-face meeting is essential
  - Monitoring Progress and Obtaining Consensus
    - heavy emphasis on up-front setting of goal and expectations
  - Managing Performance
    - regular meetings and reviews
- Advantage to teams with a prior history of working together
COMBINED FINDINGS

Factors That Most Influence Success

• Ability to communicate well and often
  - Interpersonal skill -- build rapport, deal with conflict, empathize
  - Written and verbal -- clarity and consistency, frequent and regular
  - Technological tools – multiple, to support communication

• Tendency to take initiative
  - Seek clarity, active listening, anticipate and prepare
  - Employee preparation, training, experience enhances success

• Very active management
  - Careful selection of members or assignments
  - Common understanding up-front
  - Well-defined and effective processes
  - Regular review, actively address concerns

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DISCUSSION

- As a manager, what single action can you take to improve the quality of virtual work in your organization in the coming year?

- Suggest a research topic for next year’s EPSE class (e.g., what management issue is your organization struggling with)?