Virtual Teams – the Communication Challenges

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Nowadays, many of us participate in or manage an assortment of virtual teams around the globe. Yet, because people don't meet face to face, miscommunication is a hazard. Obviously, the goal of a virtual team is to solve problems utilizing the best players wherever they are located. Phone conversations, E-mail, instant messaging, voice mail and webinars minimize the need for face-to-face conversations, but before deciding on which vehicle to use, it is important to consider the medium that will best convey the message for its members.

Telephone Conversations with all members of a virtual time are necessary from time to time, but, due to time differences, they are difficult to arrange. When they do occur, it is important to set a clear agenda and to gain participation from all the members. Sometimes, the location with the largest group dominates the meeting. People also inadvertently interrupt because there are no visual cues, and they often have side bar conversations while someone in another location is speaking. Some who feel insecure about their English may be reticent about sharing opinions with the whole group. Setting appropriate ground rules and asking for contributions from each speaker or location is key.

E-mail should be selected when details need to be spelled out or there is a lot of information. The mistake that many people make using e-mail is they discuss multiple topics in the same e-mail, and typically the recipient responds to the last item instead of all the requested issues. The subject line will enhance communication if it clearly defines any required actions. Since people read into the "tone" of an e-mail, it is wise to review the message before sending to check clarity and avoid cultural misunderstandings.

Instant Messaging, the real time communication between two or more team members via typed text on computers over a network connection, is considered by many to be less intrusive than a phone conversation. It allows team members to pose their questions and receive instant clarification. While chatting with one's social network on company time can be an issue with IM, a more serious problem is security. Confidential information and project details shared with the wrong people can cause dire consequences to an organization so team members need to know what the limitations are.

Voice Mail is often the default method of communication. Because people do not check voice mail constantly, it may not be the best choice. When leaving a voice mail, it is important to state the issue, the action you are seeking from the recipient and the benefits. If there is confusion about what action is being requested or the urgency, the message may get saved and potentially overlooked.

Webinars are a great option for communicating with people on a virtual team, especially if one attaches a web cam to his or her monitor. Participants can not only view important documents, but they can see the attendees. Obviously, a good rule of thumb is to look directly into the eye of the camera and to use a headset since it will minimize feedback loops and enhance the audio quality.

With a variety of options available for communication, virtual teams need to select the appropriate vehicle. Webinars, telephone conversations, instant messaging, voice mail and e-mail only go so far. A lack of face time can mean that relationships are not as strong. Technology requires that one be more conscious of the way the message is delivered and how it might be received.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our website, www. ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.