

The Digital



NavigatorEG

The Global Virtual Project Team: Briefing Paper

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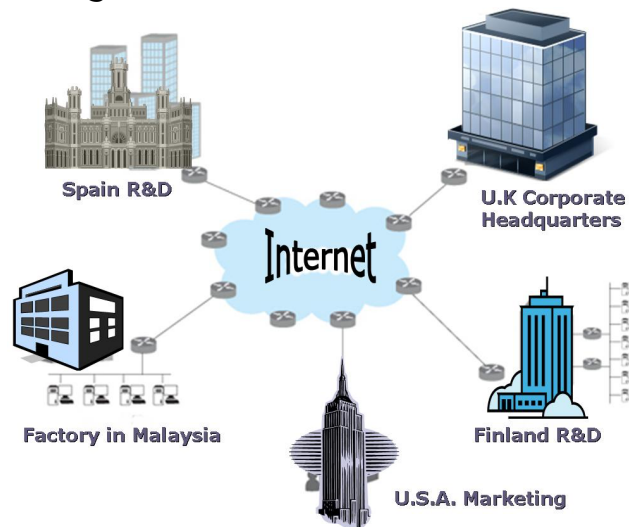
The term *virtual communication* can be used to describe the artificial space and network linkages connecting a separate and dispersed group of users using various forms of computer and communication technology. From social media sites like Facebook and Instagram to videoconferencing software like Zoom and WebEx, the common denominator with all forms of virtual communication is the ability to create a simulated environment. The communication can be both synchronous (real time) as well as asynchronous (different times). The selection and type of communication technology is based on how much information content the sender wishes the receiver to have. Researchers' Daft & Lengel (1986) refer to this as *media richness*. The difference in quality and depth varies according to the communication medium.

Virtual Private Network

A *virtual private network* (VPN) is a computer network that that uses a dedicated data and public telecommunications infrastructure to provide remote users (or departments) secure access to their organization's network. A VPN can range in size and scale of operation. Such examples

might include a major medical hospital that must provide secure healthcare information to physicians and other medical professionals located in a variety of clinics and adjoining facilities. Another example might be the transnational business enterprise operating in multiple countries that must tie together multiple divisions responsible for research and development, manufacturing, sales, marketing and strategic decision-making. To that end, various members of a so-called “virtual team” need immediate and secure access to the company wide data base for a variety of information needs and shared documents. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Transnational Organization and Virtual Private Network



Source: R. Gershon, 2020

Global Virtual Teams

International project teams are the key to smart, flexible and cost effective organizations.

A global virtual team represents working professionals from a TNC’s worldwide operations assembled together for both regular international operations as well as specialized project assignments. They are staffed by working professionals from different countries. More and more, global virtual teams are used as part of a larger effort to share international expertise

across the entire organization. The global virtual team offers up certain distinct advantages, including shared access to information, collaborative research and design work, reduced travel costs etc. Advancements in communication technology and intelligent networking have elevated the work of virtual team to a whole new level in terms of collaborative effort.

At the same time, global virtual teams bring with it a unique set of challenges. Foremost, are issues pertaining to trust involving differences of culture, geographic dislocation, complex problem solving and the effective collaboration of ideas. Specifically, how does one creatively engage a group of people that one has never physically met and trusting that everyone is equal to the task? The global virtual team presents a unique set of challenges in terms of blending the technical efficiencies of virtual communication with the practical needs of creating a cohesive international project group.

Videoconferencing and Remote Working from Home

One of the standard tools for the global virtual team is the videoconference. The videoconference provides an electronic meeting format using a combination of real-time video streaming, audio sound and graphic display. The project team (or organizational group) are typically linked together at two or more locations and is the quintessential example of virtual communication. It serves as an alternative to face to face meeting. The virtual meeting permits the exchange of information, data, and/or drawings between multiple people at separate locations. The virtual meeting can include both point-to-multipoint videoconferences using structured conference meeting rooms as well as Internet-based conferencing using such conferencing software as Zoom, WebEx or Microsoft Teams.

The Lessons of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Starting in the spring of 2020, the Covid 19 pandemic disrupted the world's economy by forcing the closing of schools, business and government agencies throughout the world. But like a natural disaster or war, necessity proved to be the mother of invention. One of the unintended consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it has led to an exponential increase in the use of Zoom and equivalent conferencing software, thereby, creating a new comfort level in terms of its use for business, education, healthcare as well as the general public.

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted both large and small businesses alike. It forced the relocation of working professionals from a dedicated place of business to a person's home, apartment or remote setting. Prior to Covid-19, the term "telecommuting" was an idea in principle that applied to some working professionals, but never got the full support of mainstream business. At issue, in the telecommuting debate, was whether people working at home could be trusted to work efficiently, be productive and not game the system. Now suddenly, the question of whether people could be trusted to work at home was a moot point. The home office would undergo a major redefinition in terms of set-up and design. The new office environment would require a desktop or laptop computer, a high-speed Internet connection, virtual meeting software and a cellphone.

The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a major tipping point in terms of promoting remote working at home and the regular use of Zoom and equivalent of videoconferencing software. What became apparent over the course of a year was the level of success and productivity accomplished by many working professionals operating from home or remote settings. The lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic forced many business enterprises to

reconsider the need for massive building infrastructure and office space going forward. Many employees, then and now, appreciated being able to work from home. The so-called *hybrid* position (working both a home and in the office) has now become a regular option for many of today's working professionals. One of the other important consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is a lessening need for physical travel and the standard weekday flight and two day meeting. They are no longer needed. Those days are gone forever. The virtual meeting and remote working from home have now become a standard feature of today's digital economy.