

Fatigue Risk Management Info Sheet: Leading a Virtual Team During Covid-19



Over the last 30 years, technology has revolutionised the world of office-based work. Computers now dominate the workspace, and the advancement of communication technologies has enabled companies to keep running during Covid-19, with new working practises established and employees working from home. As an extension to the UK lockdown was announced last week, company leaders have the challenge of continuing to lead their teams virtually for the immediate future.

THE CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Working in a virtual team can be rewarding, with the potential for increased productivity, better project outcomes, and elevated worker flexibility. However, virtual teams require specific management strategies, with a focus on facilitating both work and non-work-related communication. The new way of working can bring up new issues for executives, because individuals are not working together in the same location. Virtual working presents novel challenges for leaders such as the potential for diminished trust, communication, and overall efficiency and effectiveness.

In a virtual team, there is limited opportunity for face-to-face interaction, ‘water-cooler’ catching up regarding work and non-work topics, and non-verbal communication. This limits the personal connection and communication between employees, and reduces the build-up of respect and empathy, which are required for trust between employees.

Trust is essential to a virtual team’s effectiveness – it positively facilitates performance, the resolution of problems and uncertainty, and social information exchange (Walther and Bunz, 2005), all of which are essential for the success of a team. Traditional theories relating to the establishment of trust between members of a team state that face-to-face interaction, shared

past, expectation of future interaction and shared social understanding are essential for trust to be formed. In virtual teams, particularly those assembled on a short-term, project specific basis, it is possible that none of these facilitators of trust are present. Without the establishment of trust between team members, uncertainty is elevated, and team members have limited confidence in the wider team's ability to complete the project and overcome any problems. Establishing trust is possible without these facilitators – but it does require specific and directed effort from both team members and management.

Much of the concern relating to reduced trust and communication between virtual teams is due to a lack of face-to-face interaction. This can also result in misunderstanding between team members. When team leaders deliver instructions to their team members, lack of specificity and the inability for the leader to see any confusion / lack of understanding from their team may result in inappropriate work being completed, or a 'I thought it was obvious that ...' situation (Ferrazzi, 2014).

Additionally, lack of non-verbal cues during conversation either over the phone or via email may result in agreement on a course of action, when there are actually members of the team who do not agree, but are not comfortable speaking out alone. Whether this is due to lack of trust, perceived low seniority or members of the team being less vocal, this is more likely to be picked up in a face-to-face setting.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGING AN EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL TEAM

- **Form the right team for your Covid-19 workstreams.**

Where possible, for example when initially forming a team for a specific project, having a degree of control over the make-up of the team is useful. People who work successfully in virtual teams have good communication skills, understand their role within the team, and can explain what everyone is contributing to the team. Those who have successfully worked together in the past may have already established trust, but they need to be open to new ground-rules and methods of working in the new team. For teams to work effectively, size is also important; when teams exceed more than four or five members, individual feelings of responsibility for the output can reduce, and productivity drops. For a large project, or in a wholly virtual company, organise workers into appropriate sub-teams, each responsible for their own areas – just as you would a physical office or team.

- **Establish goals, ground-rules and processes.**

In order to reduce uncertainty from the outset, the goal of the team should be established – why are you all working together? What milestones are being targeted? What are individuals contributing to the overall goal? Specific guidelines for team members are important – research has shown that rules reduce uncertainty and enhance trust between team members. Guidelines may include:

- The methods of communication which are best used for different tasks (see next point), and how to use them most effectively
- Everyone works in a standardised way, which is documented and constantly evolving – but not ambiguous, to prevent individual micro-systems that are not compatible with each other. Examples of this may include document templates
- Where team members can access information about projects, the company, guidelines etc. – i.e. where is the team 'knowledge bank'
- Hours when team members should be available – a major advantage of virtual working is the opportunity to be flexible with work hours, but there must be overlap in working hours, to allow for real-time (also called 'synchronous') communication and collaboration between team members

- **Use the right communication technology for the task.**

Every year, new developments in communication technologies allow for virtual workers to collaborate in new ways. Team communication can be enhanced by selecting a variety of different communication tools, each suited to different tasks – but beware not to overwhelm team members. Provide guidelines, and appropriate training, on what communication tools are used for different tasks, and make sure that the tools are suited to the task. There are online communication tools available that contain multiple different types of communication options, for example video and conference calls, direct messaging, team message boards etc. However, if one of these all-in-one solutions does not suit your team's needs, there are plenty of tools available that can be combined to suit your team.

- **Idea generation and sharing information and updates.**

For brainstorming activities, consider whether time pressure is necessary. If you have a slightly longer timeline, consider using online communities (for example Yammer or Stormboard), where all team members can contribute, in their own time. In such a forum, there is less likelihood of a strong personality overwhelming the discussion, and team members who are not native speakers of the common team language can take the time to read and understand messages, and to write their response. Share information and updates among team members using an internal blog or social network (for example Yammer). This allows workers to discuss the content with each other, add visuals, and give an overview of internal communication more effectively than through using email.

- **Working collaboratively on documents.**

For on-going project work and document preparation, use collaborative tools that allow multiple people to work on the same document simultaneously (for example Google Documents), and chat rooms to replicate the intra-office discussions. Chat rooms and instant messaging allow team members to communicate constantly across the day, asking small questions that they may not otherwise, as they are 'too minor' to email. Separate chats can be implemented, for example at a team level for project work, and a company-wide group for more non-business related chat, in order to encourage a 'water-cooler' effect, and maintain feelings of open communication and team environment between individuals. Team members should be encouraged to use these chat channels; studies have shown that team members who are the most trusted exchange frequent messages, show initiative and interest in other's responses, provide substantive feedback to their colleagues on work, and notify others of their expected absences (Walther & Bunz, 2005).

- **Feeding back information to your wider team.**

Presenting information verbally is best achieved through video conferencing (for example through Zoom or Teams). Everyone can be seen by everyone else, which enables non-verbal communication, and reduces the likelihood of multi-tasking resulting in distractions. Adding screen-sharing capabilities enables visual explanation, to ensure that everyone is on the same page. In order to increase the effectiveness of calls:

- Avoid long monologues, and try and use the video conference for real-time discussion.
- Call on people to share their thoughts
- Designate a team member as a 'candour advocate' – they should speak up when something is being left unsaid, and call out criticism that is not constructive. This is important for ensuring that communication is open and honest, without being unnecessarily negative.
- For longer presentations or information that forms part of the team 'knowledge bank', make videos, with added transcripts and / or technical guides where appropriate. Employees can then access the videos whenever they need the information, and they can form part of the on-boarding process for new starters.

- **Plan, and begin work well in advance.**

Working virtually can mean that tasks take a little longer than working in an office. For example, revisions of documents with input from everyone can be a little more time consuming, particularly if collaborative document tools are not used. Therefore, it is important to start work early and set deadlines for subtasks. Meeting these deadlines increases trust between team members. When beginning projects, the leader should make a clear plan, so that all team members are aware of their own roles. The plan should also include expectations for the project regarding communication, both on a more casual hourly basis through the chat facilities, and more formally as team video briefings.

- **Demonstrate strong, inclusive leadership.**

Leadership is even more important in virtual teams than in the office. The leader should provide more structure, and be more proactive when managing virtual teams. For example, allocating specific tasks to appropriate individuals, setting deadlines for stages of work tasks, and leading by example in terms of communication. As well as work-related conversations, trust and team cohesion is built when teams communicate non-work related aspects of their lives. Leaders should encourage this, so long as it does not become a distraction from work, for example by allowing each team member a couple of minutes at the beginning of video calls to share something about their week. Specific social time can also be scheduled, for example virtual coffee breaks where everyone takes 10 minutes or so to chat about non-work topics. The timing of such social interactions should take into consideration time-zones of workers – consider rotating the times to take into account your workforce. The leader should also ensure that the team is communicating appropriately, and key conversations are happening in such a way that all team members are aware and can participate. If any team member feels that they are out of the loop, this can lead to feelings of mistrust, and misunderstandings.

For further information on our Fatigue Risk Management research, training and consulting services get in touch:

- Phone: +44 (0)1276 859 519
- Email: hello@bainessimmons.com
- Website: www.bainessimmons.com