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Inevitable vs. Evitable: An Approach to the Better Situation for Virtual Teams

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Abstract

It is often believed that because virtual members trust one another less than the non-virtual do, and therefore, the traditional face-to-face teams are better than the virtual. It is desirable that the virtual team is organized to cope with the inevitable, restrictive situation in which they cannot organize a team with face-to-face meetings. However, we believe that even if a manager coping with a certain problem can organize a face-to-face team (evitable situation), there might be some areas or cases in which organizing a virtual team is better than organizing a face-to-face team. This paper suggests that it is important for practicing managers to identify when (for which situations) the virtual teams are most suitable and can be successful.

I. Introduction

Using information technology, organizations are becoming virtual in order to cope with the rapidly changing business environments. Gibbs and Keating (1995) mention that the signature feature of a virtual corporation’s new control environment will move increasingly toward automated controls and away from those that require manual intervention. However, trust still remains the question in that the information technology does not guarantee that the remote members without face-to-face meetings can trust one another (even though video conferencing is implemented). Peters (1995) states that virtual and trust are the key ideas for transforming business, and Coutu (1998) shows that trust can and does exist in virtual teams, but it develops in a very different way than in traditional teams. Handy (1995) proposes that seven rules of trust can help virtual organizations establish trust among the members, and he also says that virtual organizations are built on trust (Handy, 1994). Although it is commonly accepted that the virtual is the trend which is inevitable in future business activities, a dominant idea is that the improvement of the trust level in the virtual organizations is, in fact, hard to implement. To practicing managers, it is important when (for which situations) the virtual teams are most suitable and can be successful without losing trust. This research is intended to find some business areas or cases in which virtual organization is most suitable for managers without losing trust. Above all, the virtual team concept needs to be clearly defined, however.

II. Inevitable Situation

The use of database query and manipulation languages, groupware, intranet, and the Internet can provide a workable, reliable, and flexible base of systems for creating the platforms for virtual teams. Until now, we have organized the virtual teams largely to cope with the following two inevitable situations.

1. When the team members are physically dispersed

The traditional team could not achieve its purpose without traditional face-to-face meetings in a conference room, and there was no technology available to support a remote member who belonged to the team (Basil & Cook, 1974). But, with the advent of network technology, this limitation is the easiest to be overcome by the virtual team. Technological advances like powerful notebook computers, telecommunications software, voice mail, and video-conferencing enable workers to keep in contact with customers and co-workers even across the ocean. Handy (1994) mentions that as technology continues to turn the unlikely into the familiar, it becomes cheaper and quicker to communicate with people electronically and telephonically rather than having face-to-face meetings in a room. Greengard (1994) also shows that the percentage of Fortune 500 firms that build work teams consisting of members at different sites increased from 44% in 1989 to 89% in 1994. It has been also asserted that the shift to the virtual office or organization seems inevitable or is becoming increasingly common (Berger, 1996; Lally & Kostner, 1997). In short, virtual teams can be organized to cope with a situation in which the participants are physically dispersed.

2. When the number of participants must be minimized to reduce the cost of meetings

Network technology enables the managers to organize a virtual team regardless of the number of participants. For instance, the NCR Corporation assembled a virtual task team of more than 1,000 people working at 17
locations to develop a next-generation computer system. With high-speed telecommunication networks and information systems technologies, the virtual task force team completed the project on budget and ahead of schedule (Lipnack and Stamps 1997). Consequently, the increased number of participants using network technology raised commitment among the team members and lowered resisting forces and tensions; this in turn stimulates interest in the strategic plan throughout the organization, at all levels.

There are also many companies transforming their organizational structure into virtual organizations in order to prepare them for the inevitable 21st century business environment. IBM, AT&T, Travelers Corporation, Pacific Bell, Panasonic, J.C. Penney, Gerling Group, and SOFTTEK are among the firms embracing the virtual-office concept (Greengard, 1994; Loebbecke & Jelassi, 1997; Stephenson, 1990). However, the efforts made by these companies have resulted from the necessity mainly to cope with these inevitable, restrictive situations in which they cannot organize a team with face-to-face meetings.

### III. Evitable Situation

A commonly accepted idea is that traditional face-to-face teams are better than virtual teams. It is no surprise that many authors (e.g., Cohen, 1997; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998) have reported that the virtual members trust one another less than do the non-virtual. However, we believe that even if a manager coping with a certain problem can organize a face-to-face team (evitable situation), there might be some cases in which a virtual team is (absolutely) better than a face-to-face team. However, it is clear that a face-to-face meeting does not always help us trust each other, because we can be blinded by other's facial expression and gestures. The manner in which we often experience that face-to-face meeting sometimes makes it difficult to deliver the real message and thus to say, “No.”

A virtual team can be effective for such situations in which even if seeing each other is possible, not seeing each other can help us to trust each other. We sometimes tend to put more trust in someone whom we have never seen than in one whom we have seen. This is because we know that we have a tendency to trust someone by his/her outward appearance. Furthermore, traditional face-to-face teams tend to expose the problem of information security because they are based on face-to-face meetings. The problem of information security is fundamentally attributed to the face-to-face meeting, which is inevitable in face-to-face teams. Not only does the face-to-face meeting enable members to share information having no relation to the task which is given to the team, but it also enables outsiders to have information which they should not have. In a virtual team, although it may happen that some confidential information is exposed to outsiders, it is possible for the server to track the center of disturbance.

Anonymity gives us another evitable situation. Each member of the team can communicate with his/her nickname or code name given by the team leader, the only one who knows the members. If a member does not know who are involved in the team or the existence of the team itself, they can’t make any response to the team. Cohen (1997) reported that because a virtual team organized to develop training programs had communicated mostly through the Internet, the team members have an advantage because they work in an environment free of racism, sexism, and other judgment barriers. A possible way to avoid the friction among the members is by keeping the virtual team anonymous. The following table summarizes that virtual teams can be organized to cope with not only inevitable situations, as well as evitable situations, even when a manager can build a face-to-face team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inevitable Situations</th>
<th>Evitable Situations</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. When the team members are physically dispersed</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. When the number of participants must be minimized</td>
<td>2. When the information security and anonymity among members is required</td>
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### IV. Conclusion

This paper is intended to focus on one of those group facilitators, trust, which should be regarded as an important factor when a virtual team is organized. We believe that even if a manager coping with a certain problem can organize a face-to-face team (evitable situation), there might be some areas or cases in which organizing a virtual team is better than organizing a face-to-face team. This paper suggests that it is important for practicing managers to identify when (for which situations) the virtual teams are most suitable and can be successful without losing trust.

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