Virtual Task Force Teams: A New Avenue to Overcome the Limitations of Traditional Task Force Teams

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Virtual Task Force Teams: A New Avenue to Overcome the Limitations of Traditional Task Force Teams

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Abstract

There is nothing novel about the idea of assembling a group to work toward the solution of a specific problem, then dismantling it when the task is completed. We introduce an evolving concept, virtual TFTs (Task Force Teams), as a subset of virtual organization not only to effectively deal with a specific task that cannot be performed either as efficiently or effectively through current organizational structures and policies, but also to overcome the limitations of the traditional TFT. This paper is intended to show both how the virtual TFT is different from the traditional one and how the former can overcome the limitations of the latter.

Introduction

A TFT has long been considered as one of the most powerful organizations to cope with complex, interdependent, and transient tasks in a turbulent and uncertain business environment. In fact, task force teams have tackled a variety of diverse organizational problems related to new product developments, project management, industrial safety, labor and union relations, external public relations to effectively deal with the local community and region, etc.

Nevertheless, it is also well known that traditional TFTs have at least four limitations due to organizational and technical causes.

1. A traditional TFT cannot be organized when the members are physically dispersed (Basil & Cook 1974).
2. The number of participants in a TFT should be limited to reduce the cost and time of meeting (Harper & Harper 1994).
3. The friction between outsiders and regular members of the TFT occurs (Martin 1976; Wickesberg & Cronin 1962).
4. A traditional TFT is vulnerable to security problems as it is based on face-to-face meetings (Ware 1984).

It is tragic that TFT efforts fail, ending either miserably with a bang or sadly with a whimper. In fact, there are many failure cases because of these limitations (for example, Ware 1984; Lee 1993; Hagel III 1994). But the rapidly decreasing cost of hardware and availability of efficient networked systems appear to be favorable to the TFT (Kimmons & Loweree 1989). Moreover, O'Leary et al. (1997, p.52) suggest that although the idea of virtual organizations is not new, recent developments in information technology capabilities, such as the World-Wide Web (WWW) and artificial intelligence (AI), allow the development of new implementations of virtual organizations that exploit the capabilities of those new technologies.

The virtual task force team is an evolving concept, consisting of a group of people who collaborate closely even though they are separated by space (including national boundaries), time, and organizational barriers. This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How is a virtual TFT different from the traditional TFT?
2. How can a virtual TFT overcome the limitations of the traditional TFT?

How is a Virtual TFT Different from the Traditional TFT?

A TFT is commonly used by organizations to deal with temporary problems and opportunities that cannot easily be handled by the existing organizational structure, and it is a form of horizontal contact designed to solve problems of multiple departments, and it is made up of representatives from each of the affected departments (Cleland 1996). The characteristics of a TFT can be summarized as: (1) it is a temporary system in the life of an organization; (2) it is created to perform a specific task that cannot be accomplished either as efficiently or as effectively through current organizational structures and policies; (3) it is disbanded once the task is completed.

How Can Virtual TFT Overcome the Limitations of Traditional TFTs?

The use of database knowledge query and manipulation language, groupware, intranets, E-mail, the World-Wide Web, and the Internet can provide a workable, reliable, and flexible base of systems for creating the platforms for virtual TFTs, which are characterized by the following.
In a nutshell, the virtual TFT is defined as a TFT which is organized by a group of people who collaborate closely even though they are separated by space (including national boundaries), time, distance, and organizational barriers (See Figures 1 and 2).

1. Transcendency—Virtual TFT can transcend time, distance, organization size, and technologies because network technology can make the team members communicate with one another. Recent ongoing developments of telecommunication technologies such as the National Industrial Information Infrastructure Protocols (NIIPP) will permit manufacturers, suppliers, and sellers to be interconnected so that they can work as an integrated virtual enterprise as if they were part of the same enterprise (Hardwick and Bolton, 1997).

2. Infinity—Virtual TFTs can have an infinite number of participants. Network technology enables the participants to share information in a data server.

3. Anonymity—Virtual TFTs enable the members to keep their participation anonymous, because it can be also designed to conceal the identities of those involved in the virtual TFT and even to conceal the existence of the team itself. These characteristics can be used to overcome the limitations of the traditional TFT.

1. Traditional TFT could not be organized when the members were physically dispersed. As said earlier, a shortcoming of traditional TFTs includes the necessity of face-to-face meetings in a conference room and there was no technology available to support a remote member who belonged to TFT (Basil & Cook 1974). Thanks to computer-mediated communication technologies such as such E-mail, computer conferencing systems, telewriting systems, multi-media E-mail, and group support systems, a virtual TFT can communicate and get things done regardless of their physical locations. These virtual teams equipped with information technologies are invalidating the old 50-foot rule—"If people are more than 50 feet apart they are not very likely to collaborate." (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). In their latest book, Lipnack and Stamps show many interesting case studies, including Sun Microsystems, for example, that decided to tamper with its successful culture that has relied on "hero mentality," and create cross-boundary virtual teams, “Sun Teams.” The company-wide “Sun Teams” resulted in great success in improving customer satisfaction.

2. The number of participants should be minimized to reduce the cost and time of meeting. Infinity, which is one of the characteristics of network technology, enables virtual organization to mobilize a large number of employees to assemble a virtual TFT. According to Lipnack and Stamps (1997), 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.

3. The Friction between outsiders and regular members of the organization occurs. This problem can be solved by organizing the virtual TFT anonymously. The friction between outsiders and regular members is attributed to the estrangement felt by outsiders. If the outsiders don’t know who are involved in the TFT or the existence of the TFT itself, they can’t make any response to the TFT. Consequently, the anonymity supported by virtual TFT can solve the problem of the friction between outsiders and regular members. Cohen (1997) reports a case of virtual TFT organized to develop training programs and mentions that virtual team members have an advantage because they work in an environment free of racism, sexism, and other judgment barriers. This show that the virtual TFT can also lessen the friction between the regular members and the outsiders.

4. A traditional TFT tends to expose the problem of information security, because it is based on face-to-face meetings. The problem of information security is fundamentally attributed to the face-to-face meeting, which is inevitable in traditional TFTs. Not only does the face-to-face meeting enable members to share information having no relation to the given task, but it also enables outsiders to have information which they should not have. The virtual TFT can keep the confidential information from leaking out of the team. Although some confidential information may be exposed to outsiders, it is possible for the server to track the center of disturbance.

To be successful, virtual TFT designers should consider the following:

1. Establishing the trust. (Coutu 1994; Greenbaum 1998). Because it is difficult for virtual members to trust one another, they need to begin their interactions with a series of social messages before focusing on the task itself

2. Encouraging the network connection. (Solomon 1998). The team members need to stay connected to understand the progress of the task without delay.

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Preparing for the technological changes (Corbin 1997). Because a virtual TFT is based upon the shared computing environment among the members, the designer need to take into account the effects of a new technology on the shared environment.

Conclusion

We have discussed an evolving concept, virtual TFT, as a subset of virtual organization to effectively deal with a specific task that cannot be done either as efficiently or as effectively through traditional task force teams. It is addressed that the four limitations the traditional TFT has had can be overcome or reduced by transcendency, infinity, and anonymity, which are the three characteristics supported by virtual TFT. But there are some other limitations or problems in organizing and managing TFT. For example, because individual TFT members who come from different parts of the organization usually bring them a wide diversity of viewpoints, goals, and loyalties, the TFT can be a battleground for fighting out long-standing departmental conflicts (Ware 1977).

References