

Leading a team virtually: A manager's perspective

Shima Shaikh¹, Sapna Chhabra²,
Ashwini Somayaji³

1 Medical Writing Services, Parexel
International, Hyderabad, India

2 Medical Writing Services, Parexel
International, Chandigarh, India

3 Medical Writing Services, Parexel
International, Bengaluru, India

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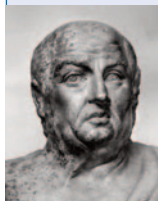
Correspondence to:

Ashwini Somayaji

ashwini.somayaji@parexel.com

Abstract

Remote working is the new normal since the COVID-19 pandemic, so learning to lead a virtual team successfully is now an essential core competency for organisational leaders. The transition from co-located teams to virtual teams has benefitted leaders by facilitating hiring of diverse talent from different geographical locations and led to increased employee contentment due to flexible working hours, increased autonomy, and freedom to relocate. However, leading virtual teams creates challenges for leaders, such as employee engagement in the absence of face-to-face conversations, workplace isolation, and team cohesion. Overcoming these challenges will be crucial for leaders to be successful in the future. This article presents an overview of the advantages, challenges, and approaches to overcome the challenges in the virtual environment.



"Fire is the test of gold, adversity, of strong people."
Seneca

With the emergence of digital and broadband internet, working from home became more common in the 2000s.¹ During the

COVID-19 pandemic, many workers were advised to work remotely full time. This had previously been allowed only for certain types of work, on an occasional basis, or as a result of unique circumstances.²

The characteristics of a virtual workplace change the ways teams work together and pose unique challenges for virtual leaders.³ A cross-sectional study conducted in 2021 suggested that, to enable satisfying and efficient virtual collaboration, the leader's central task was to establish a feeling of "us".⁴ The study also provided direct evidence of the importance of the leader's role in creating a shared social identity in virtual teams.

This article explores the advantages and challenges of leading a virtual team and provides approaches to overcome these challenges.



"Every cloud has a silver lining."
John Milton

The initial apprehension about remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic faded over time, and teams adjusted to a new normal. As the pandemic wore on, the advantages of leading a virtual team became more apparent. Leaders soon acknowledged that virtual teams could be just as productive as office-based teams. A number of other advantages emerged.

A key benefit of working virtually is that leaders are able to hire diverse talent from different geographical locations, cultures, backgrounds, and expertise, all of whom come together to work toward a common goal. Working in global teams also facilitates the "follow the sun" approach for critical deliverables in which issues can be handled by and passed between offices in different time zones, increasing responsiveness and reducing delays.

Another key benefit is that team members no longer need to commute to work. This saves time, which team members can spend with their loved ones, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, pursuing

their hobbies, and other activities. A healthy and happy team member is a great asset to the company.

Further, team members who were previously unable to relocate for family reasons, physical challenges, or other commitments have new opportunities. For example, team members from crowded cities can move to the suburban or rural environments, improving their quality of life and, often, reducing their cost of living. This has improved job satisfaction, which

in turn has helped make obtaining a work-life balance easier.

Virtual teams also enjoy more autonomy than office-based teams because employees have more control over their work and personal lives. They have the freedom to plan their day around meetings and other work commitments and can choose to work during their most productive hours. This motivates and empowers them to be more responsible and committed, which leads to better engagement and performance.

Working virtually is associated with reduced or no commute time, lower frequency of work breaks, fewer reported sick days, and a quieter work environment, all of which can enhance productivity. A study by Stanford University showed that employees who worked from home were 17% more productive (almost a full day per week), had over 50% lower job attrition rates, worked harder, and were happier overall,⁵ indicating that the factors and benefits associated with working virtually can add to employee happiness and reduce attrition.



"A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor."
Franklin D. Roosevelt

According to the 2021 CEO Benchmarking Report,⁶ 51% of chief executive officers identified "working well remotely" as a top challenge for their teams. As we navigated the virtual work environment during the pandemic, which extended from days to months and months to years, the real

challenges of leading virtual teams began to surface, and companies began to recognise that these are challenges leaders will continue to face. Communication gaps and lack of connection between leaders and their teams risked relationships and job satisfaction for both parties. Many of us were forced to socially isolate, and team cohesion seemed to erode. Leaders needed to be innovative to bring opportunities for the teams to connect better with their colleagues within and outside of specific departments, create an environment of empathy, and support work and knowledge sharing by team members.

Trust was a key aspect of work that was challenged by the new way of working. Trust amongst team members and between team members and leaders is important in creating a seamless work setting. Trust drives accountability at both ends and creates a safe space for open communication. The change from the physical to a virtual workspace momentarily jolted this setting which led to distrust between a leader and team members. Intrusive leaders that do not respect team members' privacy and off-hours work contributes to work stress.⁷

Another challenge of working virtually that emerged was an increased risk of burnout. A 2020 survey found that remote workers were burdened by having to help children with school activities and contribute to household chores.² Lines between work and family life became blurred, which was a significant contributor to "The Great Resignation of 2021".⁸

Communicating virtually presented a challenge because body language, an important part of communication, is frequently lost. The virtual mode of communication restricted the opportunities for managers to read the emotions of their direct reports, especially those who are not outspoken or do not easily verbalise their needs and aspirations.



The pandemic and working virtually also added to workplace isolation when employees missed out on opportunities to engage in developmental activities at work. This contributed to declining work satisfaction and increased stress, both of which affected the mental health.⁹

Onboarding and training periods lay the foundation for the satisfaction and future aspirations of employees and are critical in setting expectations. Working virtually created a challenge of creating human connections and opportunities for the new hires to get to know their colleagues and organisation.



"Being challenged in life is inevitable, being defeated is optional."
Roger Crawford

Every leader has their unique leadership style and ways of overcoming the challenges of virtual leadership. Below, we discuss a few approaches that can help.

Robust communication

Communication in the virtual world sometimes can be challenging due to technical faults and other unintentional disturbances of various kinds; robust communication is communication that can withstand these disturbances. It is one of the most powerful tools of leadership but ensuring it can be challenging in a virtual environment. We live in a virtual world with remarkable technologies that can help fill the

Table 1. Challenges of working in a virtual environment and suggestions to mitigate them

Challenges	Mitigation
Communication gaps between a leader and team members; within teams	Robust communication with the help of technologies
Increased risk of burnout	Offer flexible working hours and encourage team members to take regular out-of-office breaks
Employee engagement	Regular check-ins, continuous motivation, appreciation, and collecting feedback
Workplace isolation and mental health	Virtual team building activities; casual call and lunch invite; empathetic and flexible leadership
Virtual onboarding and training	Well-structured trainings and workshop; casual virtual chats with new hires; introduction to team

communication gaps between a team and its leader.

To address this challenge in a virtual setting, leaders can make themselves accessible through various channels such as emails, instant messaging, audio/video chats, regular team meetings, and a virtual open-door policy. The leader's quick responses to messages can help build confidence and trust and avoid communication breakdowns. Arranging virtual meetings, such as virtual coffee breaks, happy hours, birthday celebrations, and storytelling, can help build a close-knit team. Video calls are a necessary substitute for face-to-face meetings, and casual quick chats or calls can help foster personal connections and improve employee engagement.

Employee engagement

Employee engagement in a virtual environment may require additional effort, especially for reclusive team members. Regular check-ins, continuous motivation, and appreciation can confer a feeling of belonging to team members. Collecting feedback from team members in virtual meetings is also vital and empowers team members to speak up. A study of 208 virtual employees found that key factors affecting engagement in a virtual environment include regular contact with top management, adequate virtual training, improved tools for virtual work

Although working virtually expanded talent pool across cities and towns, it was also accompanied by the challenges of virtual onboarding and virtual training.

(e.g. a stable, high-speed internet connection and the smooth functioning of personal computers).¹⁰

Onboarding a new hire and settling them within the team can also be difficult for a leader in a virtual environment. To help new virtual employees fit in with the team, leaders can:

- Use virtual chats to get to know new members personally and professionally. However, leaders should remember that not

everyone is comfortable working in a virtual environment, so to help put new employees at ease, they should be patient and cautious.

- Help introduce new team members and help them settle in with the rest of the team
- Build trust and respect within virtual teams by rotating responsibilities for chairing virtual team meetings, sharing best practices, and telling personal stories
- Offer dinner or lunch vouchers to team members and their families.

Team cohesion

Team cohesion and building mutual respect among team members in a virtual environment

can be challenging for a leader. The pandemic has forced leaders to be extremely creative, and virtual team building games like Bingo, Trivia, and Pictionary can be used as fun events to help build team cohesion.

Conducting productive virtual team meetings and workshops or training can also be challenging. This can be mitigated by planning well-structured meetings with clear goals and schedules; tailoring expectations to the team members' experience and knowledge; and adapting dates and times of meetings so that they respect the different geographical locations of their team members.

A further challenge to team cohesion in a virtual environment is isolation, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and disconnection and can distract employees from their work. Leaders need to be empathetic and encourage team members to take regular out-of-office breaks or offer some flexibility to avoid burnout. Even a simple call or a casual lunch invite can reduce feelings of isolation.

Working in a virtual environment has created benefits and challenges for leaders.

Conclusions

Benefits of remote work include access to an expanded talent pool across different geographies; increased productivity due to improved employee satisfaction resulting from increased autonomy, more flexible schedules, increased time for family derived from not having to

commute; and an overall better work-life balance. These benefits can add to employee engagement and satisfaction and help reduce turnover.

Challenges of working in a virtual environment include erosion of trust between leaders and team members, reduced employee engagement, and reduced team cohesion. The challenges can be mitigated by ensuring robust communication and by implementing new communication technologies (Table 1). For example, increased accessibility to a leader via new communication technologies can add to a feeling of “us” and can help build trust, respect, and bonding with the leader.

In this new paradigm, for companies to move forward, effective virtual leadership is needed. A good leader thinks, “Either I will find a way or make one” – the challenges of working virtually can be overcome by thinking intelligently, putting in additional effort, and trying new approaches.

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Author information

Dr Shima Shaikh has more than 10 years of experience in regulatory medical writing. She leads a medical writing group at Parexel. She has extensive experience in authoring clinical documents including clinical summaries and overview.



Sapna Chhabra has over 10 years of experience in the pharmacovigilance industry including 8.5 years of experience in medical writing. She is a subject matter expert in PADERs. She has a strong background in safety report writing and leads the medical writing group at Parexel.



Ashwini Somayaji has over 10 years of experience in the live science industry including 6 years of experience in medical writing. She is a subject matter expert in safety narratives and has ample experience in authoring clinical documents including protocols, informed consents, and clinical study reports. She leads a medical writing group at Parexel.