

# How to build a successful virtual team

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Virtual teams have been integral to many companies for years because of their flexibility, productivity and cost-effectiveness.

Building a successful virtual team requires careful planning and strategic execution. Here's what you need to know.

Action strategies to overcome the 7 biggest mistakes a CEO can make.

## What is a Virtual Team?

A virtual team is a group of people working together from different geographical locations through digital platforms to achieve defined business goals. Individuals might live in the same city or state, or be spread around the country or worldwide.

“Remote teams” and “geographically dispersed teams” are other common phrases to describe individuals who collaborate without sharing the same physical space. Online tools such as apps and project management software are essential to communicating and collaborating.

## Benefits of Virtual Teams

One of the most obvious benefits is cost savings. There are no rent or mortgage expenses or utility bills normally associated with a physical space. But there are other significant advantages to leading a virtual team.

“It provides a lot of flexibility in how things are done,” says Bob Kulhan, founder and CEO of Business Improv. The organization specializes in creating leadership development programs and customized experiential learning programs for corporations. “It also empowers people to craft their own schedule,” he adds.

In addition to happier employees, virtual work arrangements support higher productivity, according to Alex Swire-Clark, human behavior expert, speaker, author and president of Solor Inc., a medical billing company.

“Fewer interruptions, less travel time, more attention to detail means being able to focus without all the social distractions and allows for higher productivity,” he says. “My company is very much made up of people that are highly data- and process-driven and function really well when no one is in their ear.”

## **Drawbacks of Virtual Teams**

Working virtually can have its downsides. For example, it relies on technology for communication and management. And despite tech advancements, service issues can be frustrating and disruptive.

Another challenge is that people have fewer informal opportunities to build relationships, which can create miscommunication and hinder effective collaboration.

Managers can also find it difficult to lead a team that struggles with effective communication.

“Communication has to be the highest priority,” Kulhan says. “That means beyond Slack or texting and picking up the phone if there’s a lack of clarity and making sure people know the best medium for the communication.”

## **4 Steps to Creating a Virtual Team**

Maximizing the talents of a virtual team requires strategic planning and implementation. These five steps can set you up for success.

### **1. Pick the right people for the virtual team**

Success is about choosing the right people to be part of a team because not all individuals want or are wired for virtual roles.

“Self-sufficiency is super important,” says Kulhan. “It is essential that he/she/they can operate on their own. Agility, flexibility, and a super strong communication style are also what I look for.”

Using an assessment for job benchmarking or job matching to ensure a person’s personality type or temperament is going to best fit a role so the individual doesn’t have to adapt is also helpful, adds Swire-Clark.

“When people are working in a role that is opposite of their personality type and what fulfills them, they will have to adapt and that is completely draining,” he says. “My hiring process is extremely slow and

includes performance assessments, writing a core value statement, and once we hire, we use performance benchmarks for the first two weeks so we are sure we've made the right hire."

## **2. Pick the size of the team**

Research has shown that smaller teams are more effective. Ten is often considered the maximum number, with six-to-eight workers considered ideal.

"You want to be careful not to get past 10 because then people become silent and just nod in agreement rather than having their voice heard," Swire-Clark says. "More than 10 team members also increases the probability someone will get distracted and multitask."

Larger teams also require more time to complete one-to-one check-ins, quickly filling leaders' calendars.

"When working virtual, you need to take more time with each person," says Alice Heiman, founder and chief sales energizer of Alice Heiman, LLC, a sales consultancy for high-growth companies. "You really need 30 minutes to an hour, so you really need to lay it out and look at how much time is needed with direct reports."

## **3. Set measurable goals and track significant milestones**

Be clear in the goals and set defined timelines, Kulhan says. He sets 60- and 90-day goals and syncs up on progress toward those outcomes every Monday morning.

Involving team members in defining the goals and milestones can also support success.

"Sit with your team and ask them, 'How does what we do on this team have an impact on customer success?'" Heiman says. "Once everybody agrees, we can set a goal and measure that."

## **4. Define rules of engagement**

"Craft a strategy around behavior, a common understanding. We call this the Rules of Engagement," Kulhan says. "If people don't know how they're supposed to behave toward each other, then there's absolutely no way to live up to expectations."

# **Potential Problems to Watch For**

When leading a virtual team, it's essential to be aware of these three potential challenges that are common among virtual teams.

## **1. Communication**

Virtual teams require open, frequent dialogue. Trust is the foundation for open communication, and as a leader, that means good listening, asking questions from a curiosity standpoint, and withholding judgment.

"Open communication starts with you," Heiman says. "You aren't going to have open communication until you have established trust by establishing that you want the team to win as their cheerleader and guardian."

## **2. Community**

Even though people are working from disparate locations, it's essential to nurture a sense of community and interaction with others that would occur when everyone is physically working in the same space.

“You must focus on being intentional about creating community and opportunities for engagement. In my world, we have a lot of people who are reserved, don't want to talk to people and are task-oriented,” Swire-Clark says. “Social things don't fill their bucket, but you still need to create that sense of community, so they know they're not alone.”

Heiman agreed it's critical to weave in time for fun, laughter and camaraderie. Building community also includes recognition and encouragement paired with how an individual is motivated — whether that's intrinsically or extrinsically.

“Everyone should be assigned a buddy for at least three to six months and then switch it up. It gives them a way to pump each other up when something good happens,” she says. “I also think that with virtual teams you have to give them more encouragement and appreciation.”

### 3. Security and Privacy

Online security is important for any business, but it's essential in medical billing with strict privacy laws. That means ensuring all digital tools and instant messaging apps are encrypted end-to-end and that clear lines are explained to employees exclusively using professional devices for work, according to Swire-Clark.

Embracing the potential of virtual teams can lead to increased productivity, improved work-life balance for remote workers, and enhanced collaboration across geographical boundaries, ultimately contributing to the entire organization's success.

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