



THE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL TEAMS: WORKING REMOTELY IN THE 21ST CENTURY



Introduction

Whatever reasons companies have for turning to geographically distributed teams, remote work has become practically ubiquitous. Research by IWG has found that 70 percent of professionals work remotely at least one day a week, and Gallup's "State of the American Workplace" report found that 24 percent of employees spend 80 percent or more of their time working remotely. It's not hard to see why. Advances in technology have made it easier to organize and manage dispersed groups of people. Competitive pressures and the needs of today's global economy have made virtual teams a necessity for some organizations.

Unfortunately, having solid business reasons for implementing a virtual strategy does not mean that strategy is always going to be executed well since many virtual teams do not meet performance expectations.



OnPoint Consulting's Virtual Team Study

OnPoint Consulting conducted a global research study of 48 virtual teams across various industries to identify specific practices associated with the most successful teams. We assessed six dimensions of virtual team performance, including Results, Communication, Team Motivation, Interpersonal Relationships, Collaboration, and Purpose & Roles.

Our research found that roughly one-third of the remote teams surveyed were categorized as less effective, while just under a third graded out as high-performing. The differences across all dimensions were statistically

significant, providing us with a strong basis for identifying the characteristics that distinguish highly effective virtual teams from low-performing teams.

The cause, we believe, is that too many organizations approach virtual teams as if the dynamics are the same as those for co-located teams. We found that many organizations simply recycled the same guidelines and best practices they were using for their co-located teams and hoped for the best. This fails to account for the unique dynamics of a virtual environment, resulting in less effective communication and collaboration.



The Profile of a High-Performing Virtual Team

Based on our research findings and experience, there are a number of characteristics that high-performing virtual teams tend to have in common. While a remote team does not need to possess all of these qualities to be successful, teams that exhibit several of them are more effective.

Stable Team Membership

Frequent changes in team composition can disrupt relationships and create confusion as to who is responsible for specific tasks. On average, high-performing virtual teams have greater stability due to less frequent changes in team membership. This allows members to focus on building lasting relationships, which promotes higher levels of trust and accountability.



Fewer Team Members

The most successful virtual teams tend to be relatively small. According to OnPoint's research, only 24 percent of top-performing teams had 13 or more members. When there are too many members on a virtual team, it becomes easy for some members to fade into the background and avoid accountability. Scheduling and communication also become more difficult as more members join the team.

Members Are on Fewer Teams

When employees participate in multiple teams, it can be difficult for them to focus their attention on building the relationships necessary for success on any one team. It comes as little surprise, then, that 42 percent of lower-performing teams indicated that membership in multiple teams presented a key challenge to effective communication and collaboration.

Members Are From the Same Function

Many low-performing virtual teams also happen to fit the definition of cross-functional teams, meaning that their members are drawn from different departments across the organization. Cross-functional teams face unique challenges in terms of collaboration and accountability due to their composition. These problems are much more difficult to overcome in a remote environment. The most effective virtual teams have members drawn from the same department or function.

Members Have Longer Tenure

Teams with members who have been on the team for three years or longer tend to perform better than teams with short tenure. While longer-tenured teams still need to be on the watch for performance plateaus, having a stable, long-term team allows members to build relationships and develop work process to communicate and execute more effectively.



Productive Virtual Meetings

Since effective communication is critical to virtual team success, it shouldn't be surprising that over 60 percent of high-performing teams meet at least once a week, compared to just under 30 percent for less-effective teams. High performing teams also have more productive and well run virtual meetings.

Leverage Technology

High-performing teams are more likely to possess the tools necessary for effective remote collaboration. They use video conferencing more often to conduct virtual meetings and rely on collaborative software that helps them to manage tasks and work together more efficiently.

Provide Training

Teams that have had more than four training or skill development sessions significantly outperform teams that had one or fewer sessions. This reinforces the fact that the skills needed to work remotely can be taught through targeted development programs.



Virtual Team Differentiators

There are a number of practices that differentiate high-performing remote teams. Leadership behaviors are especially important here. Effective virtual leaders provide opportunities for interaction among team members, set the tone for other members, hold team members accountable regardless of their location, and keep the team focused on its objectives.



Demonstrate a High Level of Initiative and Shared Leadership Responsibility

The members of high-performing virtual teams not only tend to be proactive and engaged, but they also demonstrate high levels of initiative. These teams place a great emphasis on role clarity and overall team success. Team members are eager and willing to take on leadership responsibilities when required, which ensures that the teams stay focused on their goals and remain accountable.



Establish a Shared Process for Decision Making and Problem-Solving

Structure is important for virtual teams. In a remote environment, it's easy to lose track of where decision-making authority is located. The most successful teams have clear processes in place to facilitate decision-making and keep information flowing to the right people at the right time. Effective virtual leaders establish these processes early in the team's life and make efforts to revisit them on a regular basis.



Clarity About How Their Work Contributes to the Success of the Organization

In a high-performing virtual team, every member understands how their work contributes to team success and how it aligns with the strategy of the organization. This is critical in a remote environment, where team members can easily become disengaged from their work and other team members. Successful remote leaders find ways to create a sense of purpose, inspire their teams, and regularly monitor the overall motivation of team members.



Trust One Another to Get Things Done

Trust is everything in a virtual team and can only be built over time by strengthening relationships between team members. Until that personal trust can be developed, most remote teams rely upon task-based trust, which is simply the belief that other team members will be accountable for their work. When team members follow through on commitments and take personal accountability for results, other members will be more willing to trust them in the future.



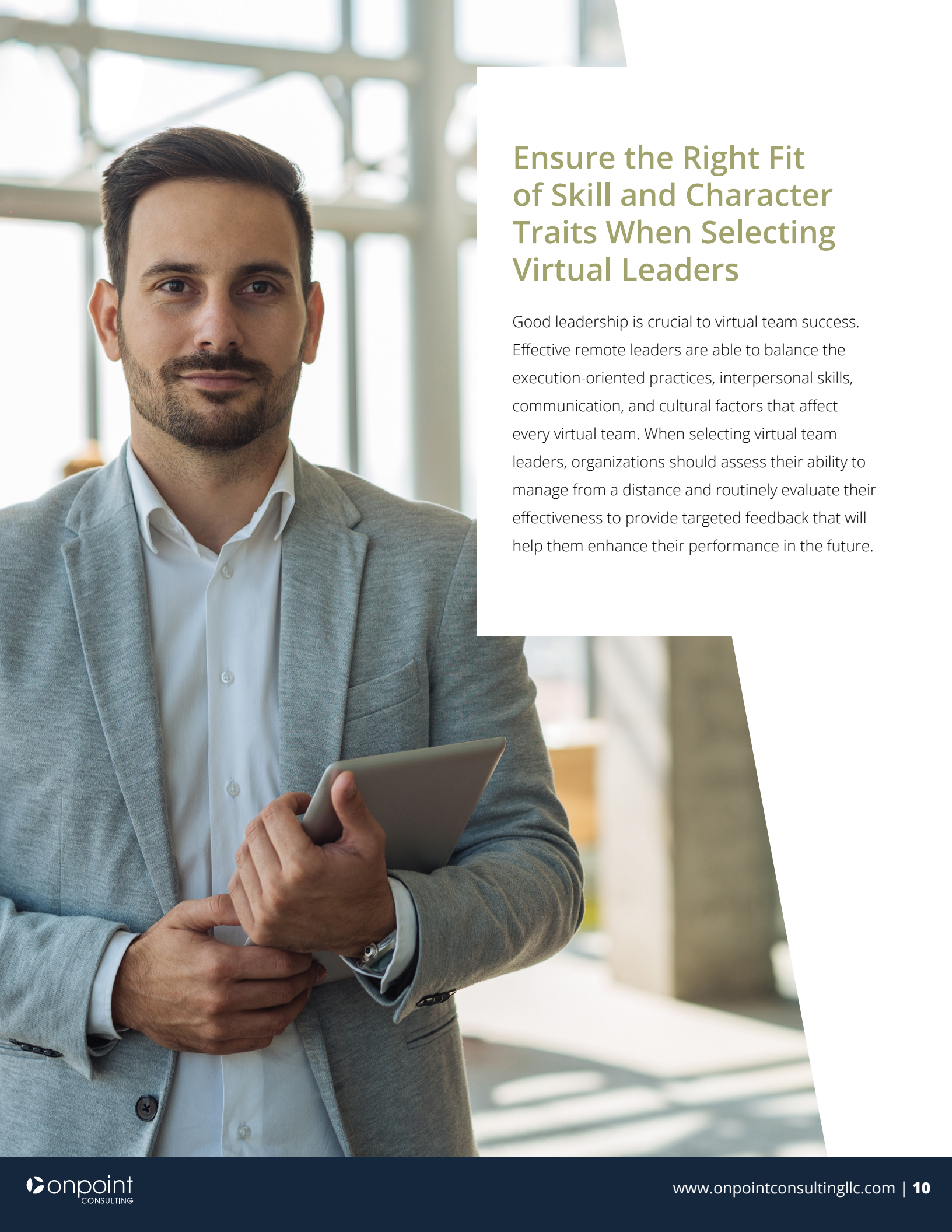
Work Together Effectively

Successful virtual teams know how to collaborate effectively from a distance to work toward collective goals. These teams are greater than the sum of their parts. Rather than independently executing tasks and objectives assigned specifically to them, team members support one another and provide assistance when needed to help the team as a whole achieve its goals.

Building High-Performing Virtual Teams

Virtual teams offer tremendous advantages to today's organizations, allowing them to better leverage the knowledge and skills they have at their disposal to solve their most pressing challenges. Taking steps to make sure these teams are set up for success makes it more likely that they will deliver on their potential. Neglecting the details in the early stages of team formation can leave team members constantly scrambling, distracting them from the work they should be focusing on collectively. If organizations are going to implement virtual teams, they owe it to themselves to provide them with every advantage possible from the onset.





Ensure the Right Fit of Skill and Character Traits When Selecting Virtual Leaders

Good leadership is crucial to virtual team success. Effective remote leaders are able to balance the execution-oriented practices, interpersonal skills, communication, and cultural factors that affect every virtual team. When selecting virtual team leaders, organizations should assess their ability to manage from a distance and routinely evaluate their effectiveness to provide targeted feedback that will help them enhance their performance in the future.



RAMP Model

The RAMP Model outlines four dimensions our research has identified as essential for virtual leader effectiveness. Successful virtual leaders are able to adapt their behavior and leverage technology to successfully manage Relationships, promote Accountability, provide Motivation, and implement team Processes.



Relationships

Builds trust, effectively manages conflict, and enhances collaboration.



Accountability

Establishes clear goals and expectations and ensures that individual and team commitments are met.



Motivation

Inspires, effectively uses influence, and engages individuals and the team as a whole.



Process

Effectively uses technology, conducts effective virtual meetings, and establishes clear processes to support virtual work.



Don't Take the Team Launch for Granted

Setting up and launching a virtual team should never be an afterthought. Organizations need to consider how membership, size, and resources can impact a team's ability to work remotely. There are a number of steps they should take to ensure these teams are set up for success:

- Establish criteria for team member selection and consider who should be on the team in order for it to make high-quality decisions and ensure buy-in.
- Limit participation in multiple virtual teams so that members can dedicate the time needed to fulfill their roles successfully.
- Develop clear operating guidelines to structure communication and decision-making.
- Hold a face-to-face meeting when the team launches to help members build relationships, understand the scope of their work, team composition, timelines, communications processes, and decision-making structure.
- Implement video and collaborative software (Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc) to overcome the lack of face-to-face interaction and increase engagement.
- Provide targeted skills training for virtual leaders and team members to enhance decision-making, communication, and feedback.



Develop Strategies to Reward Virtual Teams

To keep team members engaged and motivated, organizations need to implement programs that reward and recognize virtual teams for their collective performance. They should also make an effort to “spotlight” team members to celebrate achievements and use the online communication tools at their disposal to help them commemorate team accomplishments virtually.

Foster More Accountability

Team processes should be reviewed regularly to determine what is working well and what areas are in need of improvement. By continually monitoring and assessing both team and individual performance, team leaders can determine whether or not members are being accountable for their work and taking responsibility for their actions. If the team is not communicating or collaborating successfully, collecting feedback can help identify impediments that need to be overcome for the team to improve its performance.



Virtual Teams in Action: How to Hold High-Impact Virtual Meetings

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Build an Effective Agenda

To get the most out of a meeting and avoid wasting already scarce time, outline what will happen before, during, and after the meeting. Determine who needs to attend and give participants as much notice as possible as well as any necessary materials or information on technology that may be used.

Address Time Zone Barriers

Globally distributed virtual teams can span multiple time zones. Find times that are convenient for all team member or rotate meeting times so that the same team members aren't always forced to work at undesirable hours.

Choose the Right Technology

Identify the appropriate technologies to support the meeting's objectives. Certain communications technology provides a greater level of "richness," allowing for more feedback and personal interaction. Video conferencing, for instance, provides more "richness" than a text-based chat room.

Minimize Tangential Discussions

Tangential, off-topic discussions can easily derail virtual meetings. Process facilitation techniques (observation, diagnosis, and intervention) can be used to keep the team focused and rebalance group interactions. Preparation also helps to make meetings more efficient.



Reinforce Shared Responsibility

In a high-performing virtual team, everyone takes responsibility for keeping the group on track, managing time effectively, and meeting objectives. Assigning different members to lead parts of the session can help to reinforce shared responsibility for the meeting's success. The role of meeting facilitator can also be rotated when appropriate.

Balance Tasks and Relationships

Effective virtual teams dedicate time to building relationships as well as focusing on tasks. Scheduling time for a “warm-up” or informal conversation before or after the meeting gives team members an opportunity to get to know each other and develop trust. This is especially important when cultural and language differences are present.

Are Your Virtual Teams High-Performing?

If your organization is ready to implement virtual teams or needs to improve the performance of your existing teams, OnPoint Consulting is here to help. Our team-building and leadership development programs are based on proven research and years of practical experience with leading organizations like AmeriGas, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck, and Autodesk.

To learn more about OnPoint's programs for leading and collaborating from a distance or to develop your own specialized learning solution that meets your specific virtual team needs, contact us today.

 (203) 533-5128

 sales@onpointconsultingllc.com

 onpointconsultingllc.com