Second Edition

The Power of Virtual Distance

A Guide to Productivity and Happiness in the Age of Remote Work

Karen Sobel Lojeski
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Redefining Teams

Up to now, we've categorized members of the virtual workforce as belonging to one team or another. That's because, as a corporate society, we've been using this terminology for decades. Teamwork – or that notion, anyway – has actually been around much longer. And even in our global age, when the nature of work over the past decade has changed in every imaginable way, the word "team" is still used to describe basically any collection of resources that loosely work together around a common goal.

But does this still make sense? We don't think so entirely. In fact, the word "team" can be a misnomer and, summon up behaviors that may unintentionally increase Virtual Distance in some cases. So we turn our attention to teams and explore why and how this idea could be modified to better face the digital age.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEAMS

Even before the Industrial Age, work was done by groups gathered as apprentices under the tutelage of master craftsmen. These groups can be traced as far back as the twelfth century and were called guilds.

> Together with mutual aid, the "honour" of the craft defined the purpose for which guilds existed. There was a sense of pride in the "misterium artis," in the special technique and skill known only to oneself and one's colleagues, and in the excellence of the finished article. Artefacts must be "loyal." To be a skilled craftsman was to occupy and fulfill a recognized role, an officium (lit. duty), with its own dignity.[1]

Guild members were bonded together by a sense of individual pride as well as honor for the group as a whole. Guilds gave way to other kinds of unified organizations and evolved into professional societies and trade unions. And while the number of unions has declined in recent times, the part they played in establishing roles and affinity among specialists who considered themselves peers was an important one.

More recently, during the early twentieth century, Kurt Lewin, a renowned psychologist, made famous the concept of group dynamics.[2] He showed that group motivation was rooted in a shared sense of interdependence around tasks as well as fate – future success or survival. This discovery further fueled the team discussion. Around the same time, Abraham Maslow developed the *Needs Hierarchy Theory*,[3] which described an individual's motivational structure. Groups were an important part of this model. Right above physiological and safety needs were social needs, which included the necessity to have friends and be accepted by other people. According to Maslow, this then led to the desire for esteem, derived from one's self-respect as well as the approval of others. He argued that if these group needs were not satisfied, both the individual and the organization would suffer. These theories, along with others, like Elton Mayo's evidence about how productivity in groups improved when they knew someone was paying attention, provided a deep well of research that coagulated into a unifying idea about groups, commonly referred to today as *teams*.

An entire industry sprung up around teamwork. Many of us recall going to team training. This sometimes included watching videos starring football stars to demonstrate why teamwork was so important. As the film rolled on, full of emotionally charged effort, hardships, and victorious celebrations, the engaging voice of the narrator reminded us that there is "no 'I' in t-e-a-m-s." Who could forget it? And when the video was over, everyone felt a renewed sense of appreciation for one another.

Team compensation also surfaced as an important financial motivator. Variable pay structures were built to support group work. Many large human resources consultancies launched entire practices specializing in team compensation. Nonfinancial as well as financial bonuses were, and still are, given based on both individual and team performance. One of the most pervasive team reward systems was designed for sales. In this system, a large portion of commissions or bonuses is paid for individual performance. But, typically, there's also some percentage paid for group quota achievement. Salespeople are notorious for acting in their self-interest, but they often feel "pressure" to perform on behalf of the team as well. When they succeed and work well with others, they're often promoted to management positions and beyond. Many C-level executives have a history in sales, in part because they did well contributing to the team.

But for corporate departments other than sales, like manufacturing and production, natural groups designed around revenue contribution were harder to form. That changed when teamwork models, most commonly built on quality objectives, began to surface. By 1972, five million workers belonged to quality circles (QCs) in Japan.[4] Soon after, many American companies followed suit, implementing corporate-wide quality initiatives. Today, Six Sigma is a quality standard used throughout many corporations worldwide. This approach depends on teams achieving excellence.

It wasn't just operations and production departments that were changed by the concept of teams. In 2000, Jean Pierre Garnier, the chief executive officer (CEO) of GlaxoSmithKline, gave a talk at the British-American Business Association about his use of teams to improve innovation. Garnier described the reshaping of research and development (R&D) at the giant pharmaceutical company. Scientists were put into "start-up"-like groups, each of which had its own CEO. They were given free rein to go after finding new drug compounds. The goal was to create a "competitive spirit" and drive members using common goals designed to benefit the group. Across most industries, team formations sprang up throughout the enterprise and creative managers found appropriate rallying points around which to motivate them.

TODAY'S WORKPLACE

As a result of forces that gathered quite recently, today's organizations are more fragmented than ever before. Unlike the "closed" organizations in which teams were initially formed, the boundaries of modern companies are not well defined. As the last millennium moved into its final decade, C. K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel popularized the idea of "core competencies," which led to the splintering off of many departments considered organizationally superfluous. Core competencies were organization-specific strengths defined as "an area of specialized expertise that is the result of harmonizing complex streams of technology and work activity."[5] As an aside, note the emphasis here on task and process, reminiscent of Frederick Taylor's model from a century ago. They espoused that companies rid themselves of any part of the business that didn't directly support the company's core strength.

At the same time, anxiety began to grow around the potential "Y2K" problem. The Y2K bug was widely anticipated to wipe out computer systems around the world. Most feared that when the calendar turned over to 2000, the billions of lines of code running everything from power plants to credit card processing wouldn't recognize the "000" in the date and therefore terminate in an error, bringing everything to a halt. American Express, for example, realized in the mid-1980s that this might cause a problem, and had been working on repairing all the code for more than fifteen years prior to the event. But most organizations waited until the late 1990s to focus on fixing this potential issue. Programmers and systems engineers were hard to find, and there weren't enough to fill the insatiable need to repair software systems worldwide. So many corporations that had historically relied solely on "in-house" talent to work for their highly valued information systems reached outside the company walls to find qualified talent to help. This began what is now a common practice: hiring low-cost resources for what is considered to be "mundane" work.

These two catalysts – a focus on core competencies and the race to fix potentially devastating computer bugs – caused massive workforce change that led to the corporate structures we now think of as commonplace. Many companies began to shed whole divisions, to (1) center internal resources on specialties, and (2) move high-volume, low-value work, like fixing code, outside traditional company boundaries. In many cases, both strategies resulted in more work not just being sent out, but also commonly offshored to other countries where labor was much cheaper than in the United States. Now, of course, outsourcing is one of the mainstream strategies used to lower costs.

The immediate cost savings these changes yielded were irresistible to company executives interested in elevating stock price and profits. So as the twenty-first century dawned, information technology (IT) and operations outsourcing soared. Around the same time, another kind of corporate dilution ideal was becoming popular. Harvard professor and author Henry Chesbrough introduced the notion of "open innovation,"[6] a way to break apart innovation in new product development. It was centered on the idea that technology advancements had created the opportunity for organizations to reach beyond their time-honored borders and look outside for creative resources and, ultimately, profits. Specifically, Chesbrough defined *open innovation* to mean that "valuable ideas can come from inside or outside the company and can go to market from inside or outside the company as well. This approach places external ideas and external paths to market on the same level of importance as that reserved for internal ideas and paths to market." This idea soon won the hearts and minds of many Fortune 500 CEOs. Companies saw that they could tap expertise around the world. Open innovation led to even larger increases in workforce development outside the company and to partnerships that, up until then, wouldn't have been considered. Competitors joined forces in what was, and still is, hailed as open relationships, where information is shared freely and resulting ideas and inspiration leads to new products and services that find their way to bottom-line boosts. In the open innovation strategy, just like core competency and outsourcing, corporate walls were torn down in favor of an unbounded environment.

This trend toward disaggregation in every part of the organization was accompanied by a surge in the use of mobile technologies and information and communication technology (ICT). Businesses realized that not only could they cut costs and increase the possibility of innovation investment returns, but productivity also could be improved by leveraging technology and high-speed communications. Personal digital assistants (PDAs), which included Blackberries and other personal productivity devices, became commonplace at the start of the century. With the later emergence and ubiquity of smartphones people were equipped with everything they needed to work from anywhere at any time, which, as we've described, contributed to the formation of the virtual workforce – both inside and outside the corporation.

But one of the detriments of this limitless, "always-on" structure is that it's difficult for any one individual inside of it to imagine himself attached to a shared goal. With all of the segmentation within functions, processes, work streams, and especially relationships, it's not always possible for any one objective to be internalized by everyone involved in getting the work done. And when that's the case, it becomes a major problem to develop what Lewin called a shared fate, to motivate groups to work as teams.

A related concept, "shared mental models," is frequently emphasized by team researchers as a key to effectiveness.[7] A team has a shared mental model when all members have a common understanding of the objectives, the knowledge necessary to complete the objectives, and the deadlines for accomplishing the objectives. The notion of shared mental models works for static teams where members and objectives are stable, but as we shall discuss, a different notion is needed for the temporary team structures that dominate much of the global workplace. Amy Edmondson, a prominent team scholar, suggests that new approaches are needed that acknowledge that today's teams have to operate without the stability that characterized teams in the past.

The elimination of huge chunks of corporate infrastructure in almost all departments, and the vast virtualization of the workforce across a global spectrum, has changed the nature of work in profound ways that impact us at a personal level. Human resources are now spread out in every way, people spend more time with their computers than they do with each other, and communications are, for the most part, filtered through technology channels.

The underlying structures that made teams work the way they did have been widely obliterated. The new state of work creates unintentional disruptions to "traditional" group dynamics. In light of virtual work as we've described it, it's difficult to imagine how any one group could be defined, as a "team" in the way we originally thought of teams in the past. So the use of *teams* as a metaphor for virtual work groups is, in some cases, misleading.

In traditional teamwork, strong emotions about a larger purpose and a clear sense of interdependence motivate members to act. But if that's not the case, and companies still use this idea as a way to build motivation, then the effort may turn out to be a waste of time, or create expectations that are difficult for many to achieve. Recall that as far back as when guilds were predominant, people were motivated to work together by a "calling" of sorts – in that case, honor and pride. Lewin's group dynamics were driven in large part by feelings of close links that manifested as a visceral sense to shape a positive and shared future. Working together on tasks, those in the group felt that goals could be realized. Maslow knew that without socially satisfying interactions, a person's motivation to perform would fall off. And Mayo, who poked a huge hole in closely held dogmatic beliefs about the person as a machine, proved that people as a group perform much better when there is a feeling that others care for them as being more than a cog in a wheel.

However, it is no longer the case that virtual workers build emotional ties to one another in the ways that people have done for centuries. The loose organizations of the digital age are not usually built for this purpose. If anything, individuals en masse have become more like the specialists of the guild era, only there are no master craftsmen in the lead, and there are millions scattered around the world, leaving a schism between individual performance criteria and personal motivation to achieve collective goals. And unlike the low- or unskilled workers of Taylor's era, today's professionals are highly trained. Many expect open communication instead of strictly controlled information streams espoused by the father of bureaucratic organizations.

So as we look at organizational resources today, we must ask ourselves if we can really say that the workforce operates in teams, virtual or otherwise. Are people structured as closely linked groups who, as a whole, are motivated by deeply emotional and shared beliefs centered on a common purpose? For many, the answer is no. Splintered organizational structures and isolated work efforts often prevent teams, as we have come to understand them, from forming. And the disconnects that exist, between habitually thinking of ourselves as teams and the disconnected reality, has led to a resurgent scramble to find solutions for how to best manage what are commonly called virtual teams.

But after researching much of the literature and popular books on the subject of virtual teams, combined with our experience over the past fifteen years with dozens of large clients around the world, it has become evident that issues framed as "team dysfunction" in today's virtual workforce are not really that at all. Teams are not really dysfunctional.

They are simply not really teams.

Therefore, it's the classification system and the associated metrics that go along with it that are, in fact, dysfunctional. The problems among today's vast global professional majorities are much more profound than those described in the volumes on this subject; the problems today are symptoms of a much bigger problem – that of a fundamental structural vacuum created by a lack of an organizing principle formulated around groups in this new age. Scholars are now recognizing that there is a big gap between much of the research and what is actually happening in organizations.[8]

At the individual level, the absence of any tangible scaffolding on which to build shared identities and goals has created a black hole for many of today's workers in need of some sort of unifying and meaningful structure that fits in with the kind of work they do and the lives they lead. Without it, behaviors are falsely identified as team problems. But the fact of the matter is that in the long term, all human beings need to feel as though they are part of something bigger – and this remains elusive and unfulfilled in the group known today as the virtual workforce.

But if it's not realistic to use the image of a team to develop the inspired motivation needed to reach peak performance, what, then, might replace it? We believe the answer rests in a new form that we call *virtual ensembles*.

VIRTUAL ENSEMBLES

There are many kinds of assemblages that occur naturally in work-related activities that don't form as a team per se, but which nonetheless accomplish group goals. In the wild kingdom, for example, zebras are born with what appear to be senseless random patterns of stripes. As individual animals, they spend their time grazing and looking for food. However, each unique zebra serves a greater good. Under attack, a single zebra couldn't survive against the ferocity and strength of a hungry lion. When they come together by the hundreds to form what looks to the lion like one gigantic animal, they ward off fatal attacks. The interloper flees because an animal of such seemingly enormous size would surely eat them for lunch. The zebras live as both individuals and herd members, depending on the situation and their exposure to risk or vulnerability at any given time.

An example of how this kind of temporary group formation happens among workers is in cockpit crews. Scheduling crews to pilot a large plane is complicated. The physical whereabouts, flying time, and availability of potential crew members has to be considered, as well as their special skills. So when a crew is selected to get the plane to its destination, they may have never worked together before. But as soon as they enter that small space, each of them knows they are closely linked by a common goal: to get the plane to its destination safely. There is, of course, great risk to each of them if they don't, and not just for the obvious reason – to avoid a crash. It's also because their future careers depend, in part, on how each performs in the presence of the others. So, during the flight, they cooperate for these reasons and more. When the final destination is reached, they leave the plane and go back to their individual lives. They spend time apart sharpening skills and acquiring new learning. And the cycle of getting together, flying planes, going back to home base, and so forth continues throughout their careers. Over time, some begin to work with the same individuals repeatedly. In these cases, stronger relationships can form, which leads to deeper trust and camaraderie. Friendships outside of the workplace develop. But no one is forced to build these kinds of relationships merely because the artificial nature of an organizational structure assumes this kind of bonding.

Many in today's digital age work in one context and join with different people in another. Sometimes they might be remote or go to an office where they work at a desk or cubicle; at other times, they gather with others, either in-person or electronically. When those interactions end, they go back to their original context, set apart from the group.

This cycle of gathering, going away and working locally and/or alone, and then regrouping is akin to the zebra in the wild or the pilot in a cockpit crew. It's also very much like jazz ensembles, where musicians learn on their own but exercise their unique talents in a group. Musicians are much like digital age professionals, too, in that they have a kind of solitary "relationship" with their work. Musicians spend time with their instruments, as professional workforce members do with their devices. So for both types of professions, there's a sense of seclusion even when physically among others while working.

They are similar in other respects as well. During live performances, ensembles come together in a way that's coordinated and timely. Each member has to be in sync with the others, or else the music won't sound melodious. They are joined in a common goal – in this case, to inspire, soothe, motivate, or even perplex. In any event, they can reach their shared goal only by operating together seamlessly. Members of virtual projects also have to come together and perform. Each has to contribute his or her share of the work in a timely manner and establish harmonious communications with others to achieve goals.

Jazz ensembles meet mainly for three reasons. First, they gather to create new kinds of music. This is often done through improvisational sessions, during which each of the members experiments with an idea he or she has usually thought of beforehand. These get-togethers are called jam sessions. (Some organizations even use the term jam session to describe online meetings.) Second, musicians get together to rehearse or fix problems in a piece. These can be thought of as "workout" sessions, where members work out difficulties, practice together, and hone group efforts.

Finally, they get together to perform. The ultimate satisfaction for many comes in the audience's appreciation for their work.

Virtual workforce members get together for only 3 reasons the same reasons. First, they get together to innovate, whether it is to invent a new product or to create project plans. Second, virtual group members get together to work out problems. During status meetings and at other times during the work initiative, members join to overcome obstacles. And third, virtual groups come together to produce a final deliverable: a product, service, or software application.

In many respects, members of the virtual workforce are much like those of jazz ensembles. Recontextualizing the notion of a group – why it's formed, when it's important for members to be together, and how to develop common goals that make sense – is an important way to shake off the unconscious denial of today's changed workforce. With the ability to see something in a different light, it is often possible to see ways to make improvements or changes. To get a better sense of this, let's look at a way to assess groups based on ensemble models. A comparison chart is shown in Figure 7.1.

In summary, the structures within which people work have changed dramatically in a very short period of time. Management principles that encourage companies to disaggregate the work, as well as the rising influence of technology that separates people from one another and allows them to connect anywhere at any time, have come together to create a workforce in which the members are no longer necessarily tied to each other through organizational attachments or workplace norms. Therefore, many of the organizing philosophies used to motivate, evaluate, and reward individuals have also changed. However, our work practices and mental models about what encourages people to cooperate have not kept up. While there remain some people who might be thought of as working in

FIGURE 7.1 Ensembles and the virtual workforce.

Ensembles	**Virtual Workforce**
Is the piece technically well executed?	Is the project on time, on budget, and of high quality?
Does it exploit a variety of elements of music (i.e. rhythm, harmony, melody, texture/timbre)?	Does the project make use of all members' skills and talents, maximizing innovation and problem-solving?
Is the chief attraction not the music but the words?	Is the chief attraction not the tasks but the goals and relationships?
Are the elements of the work highly integrated so that each supports the other's function?	Are the members working together, and are they appropriately integrated into the work effort?
Does the piece appeal on a variety of levels – intellectual, emotional, spiritual?	Does the project meet the many needs of workforce members, customers, company, other constituencies?
Is there a feeling of "musicality" about it?	Have team members established a good rapport and rhythm, leading to project successes?
Is there satisfying formal organization to the way the gestures are presented and developed?	Do members enjoy their roles and do others enjoy working with them?
Is there a good balance between familiarity and variety, appropriate for the length of the piece?	Is there a good balance between innovative solutions and known solutions to similar kinds of problems?
After having been listened to many times, does the piece still have appeal that is based on some new revelations rather than solely on comfortable familiarity?	After having worked together on different projects, are members still inspired to find new ways to approach problems, or has the group settled into routines that stifle innovation or problem-solving?
Do you feel positively stimulated, better, richer, fuller, or improved in some way for having heard the piece?	Are the company and the individual members better off as a result of the group's efforts?

traditional teams – those who are permanently assigned to one group, work together in the same place, train together, and work toward clearly articulated common goals – the vast majority of the virtual workforce does not function in this way. Recent research has supported our idea in a study of multinational teams.[9] They use the term "meta-teams" to describe an intermediate team-like structure that allows virtual ensembles to group together to accomplish organizational goals.

There are structures, however, in which people can see themselves as a group without the ties that bind teams together. We have termed these "virtual ensembles" and used the metaphor of musical ensembles as a way to frame the discussion. Based on what makes an ensemble successful, we can begin to craft metrics that better reflect competencies and requirements for the virtual workforce member in the digital age.

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