New technology is starting to dismantle company hierarchies

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Expansión

The Internet has stimulated the creation of virtual teams in organisations made up of employees working out of different countries who are not subject to continuous supervision of their work.

Can you imagine forming part of a virtual team in which you have to interact with people working in different countries and in which you only have the support of new technology? This type of work team emerged at the start of the nineties as a consequence of the development of new technology in information and communication (TIC).

However, it has only been in the last few years that these virtual teams have actually started to take shape in organisations, especially in large traditional companies and in the companies which are developing their business on the net.

The current working environment, characterised by rapid and radical change together with the instantaneous flow of information on the net, makes adaptation and flexibility in the market more necessary than ever for companies. In order to respond to these needs one tends to make changes in the organisational structure. Thus, hierarchies are replaced by networks (between employees, companies, shareholders, clients, suppliers and even between competitors), departments by working processes, and duties by projects. This brings with it, at the same time, cultural changes and the need for a management style that requires the cultivation of new leadership skills to achieve a high level of commitment to the project. Furthermore, those involved in such projects have to come to feel comfortable with the tensions which arise from the challenge of constant change.

However, introducing virtual teams into an established organisation means administering a nasty but salutary shock to the culture of the company and its type of leadership. Many professionals are used to more traditional forms of supervision (daily contact) and are reluctant to cooperate when they see themselves obliged to abandon these management techniques in order to adapt themselves to the virtual working environment, where what is important is to obtain results not simply to appear to be working. The members of a virtual team are chosen to provide value for clients and shareholders through working alone, which does not require close and constant supervision. For this reason, leadership has to be shared by all the members of the virtual community. Even so, it is necessary that a formal leader exists, although remaining in the background. The leader must initiate dialogue, stimulate the team, give visibility to the project, and foster commitment. But most importantly the leader must create and maintain confidence between the different component parts of the team. In fact, the power of a virtual team lies in information, in knowledge, in experience, not in formal authority. That is why it is necessary to construct a culture based on these three
elements and that can only be achieved if there exists a culture of confidence. The final result will be the fruit of a complex puzzle in which one has known how to take advantage of the synergies which have emerged during the process. It will also be the consequence of a continuous evaluation of the project in its distinct phases.

Advantages
The advantage that a virtual team provides is that of being able to rely on the best professionals in the company, wherever they carry out their work. Thus, it is not necessary to select the participants for a specific project from a reduced number of professionals simply because they happen to be there. Once the team is chosen it is important to identify the necessary communication tools. In a traditional team communication flows spontaneously in workplace corridors and in the cafeteria. However, communication in virtual teams has to be provoked deliberately. Before the project gets under way it is advisable to organise a getting-to-know-one-other meeting so that the members can know who is at the other end of their electronic mail. Longstanding teams are the ones that make the most use of these periodic meetings to keep their collaboration and the project alive. Once the objective for which the team was created has been achieved it is a good idea to write a report on everything that has been learned on the project.

The Question

Do you need special training to be part of a virtual team?

How to deal with the coldness of the medium
José Ramón Pin, IESE Teacher
The Internet is the virtual teams' medium of communication and so has special characteristics. Knowing them is essential in order to take advantage of them and not to make mistakes. For the experts, the medium influences the content. The Internet, as a written electronic medium, is cold. It has a limited capacity for transmitting emotions and feelings. The leader and the team need skills to detect emotional states at a distance, in the electronic medium, and to learn how to respond adequately. In some cases a simple e-mail is enough. In others, a telephone call or a personal interview will be needed. This implies training. To these socio-emotional characteristics we have to add the technical knowledge of language. Umberto Eco says in his semiology that signs take on different meanings according to the circumstances. Knowing the protocol of the Internet, the significance of capital letters, of underlined words, of colours, of abbreviations, requires a technical apprenticeship.

Discipline, the crucial factor
Juan Manuel Cruz, Director of PWC Human Resource Consulting
Yes indeed, and not only looking at it from the technological point of view, but it is also essential to acquire special relationship skills that present specific requirements. There are elements of self discipline in the use of technological tools that are substantially different.
Moreover, the use of these tools also demands the development of other communication skills which must be adapted to the media when they are being used. There are some key points to be developed; the ordered management of the documents becomes the key element for sharing knowledge; one must also exercise discipline in the use of
synchronised tools that compensate for the lack of real physical contact. Some other points to be considered are: placing trust in the advanced use of planning solutions and the monitoring of projects, assuming individual commitments, having the capacity to synthesise documents and generate a greater demand of availability facilitated by tools of movement.