

# **Acxiom Corporation: Observing Virtual and Co-located Team Dynamics in Action**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Virtual teams are individuals who work toward a common goal utilizing computer technology to communicate and achieve their goal. By definition, virtual teams do not hold face-to-face (F2F) meetings. Rather, their communication and interaction is conducted through electronic mail (e-mail) and the Internet. Normal teams (co-located) are workgroups that meet F2F and communicate orally. This allows members to witness interaction, develop a visual picture of who their group members are, and see their reactions. The on-site interviews and observations of virtual and co-located team members collected in this study provides data on team dynamics and interaction.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study is based on observations of virtual and co-located team dynamics in action at Acxiom Corporation. Acxiom Corporation is headquartered in Little Rock, Arkansas, with locations throughout the United States, and in the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Japan. Acxiom Corporation has a flat organizational structure (minimum number of management layers) and its associates work in a team environment. Teams are comprised of co-located and virtual members.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Virtual teams are “groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task” (Townsend et al. 1998, p. 18).

Virtual team members typically come from different locations within and outside an organization. They often become involved in more than one team situation. Some may have difficulty adjusting to a lack of non-verbal cues. A lack of trust is common. Many have problems with spontaneous communication (Majchrzak et al, 1999).

Team leaders can enable team members to be more successful by making sure that the attention of all teams members is focused on team activities. Janice Klein and Feniosky Pena-Mora (2001), team leaders of an interdisciplinary MIT team, calls this concept “maximizing mindshare”. They suggest the following tips to maximize mindshare:

- Invest the time team members would have spent traveling to identify and manage cultural differences and geographical disparities at the onset of the project.
- Develop meeting norms and workgroup protocols that preserve and integrate cultural differences. Determine, for example, group expectations for punctuality to team meetings, and frequency of checking e-mails or group bulletin boards.
- Develop performance measurements that include the team member's virtual work as well as assignments in the home office.
- Designate someone to mind the "virtual water cooler." Regular one-on-one telephone conversations with team members will help clarify local priorities and concerns. This will help coordinate the players, manage the project and identify and bridge any gaps that arise.

Roger Ballentine, co-director of the Center for the Study of Work Teams (CSWT) at the University of North Texas in Denton, TX, makes some key points about virtual teams in a recent article in HR Magazine (Johnson, 2002):

- Virtual teams aren't miracle cures.
- Virtual teams should exist only for the same reason that any team exists.
- Virtual teams must have a common purpose and share responsibility for specific outcomes and work interdependently.
- Virtual teams make sense when geography demands it.
- A virtual team without the "team" built in regresses to telephone calls and faxes pretty quickly.

The CWST has also found five areas of training that are especially useful for virtual team members:

- Understanding the technology infrastructure.
- Using technology tools.
- Collaborating effectively in a work group.
- Conducting virtual meetings.
- Planning and managing tasks (Johnson, 2002).

Specific terms are used to describe virtual team interaction and collaboration dimensions based on location and time of interaction:

- Working together at the same time - "realtime" or "synchronous"
- Working together at different times - "asynchronous"
- Working together in the same place - "colocated" or "face-to-face"
- Working together in different places - "non-colocated" or "distance" (Usability First, 2002)

Virtual team members use various computer applications to communicate and collaborate. Asynchronous applications can include email, newsgroups, mailing lists, workflow systems, hypertext, group calendars, and collaborative writing systems. Synchronous applications can include shared whiteboards, video communication, chat or instant messaging systems, decision support systems, and multi-player games (Usability First, 2002).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Co-located and virtual team members working at offices in Conway and Little Rock will be interviewed and observed. Virtual team members located in New York City and other locations around the world will be interviewed. This study consists of three phases:

- Visiting Acxiom offices in Conway and Little Rock to conduct observations and interviews with selected teams. Employees that are co-located in the Conway and Little Rock offices were observed and interviewed on-site. Virtual team members, who are located in New York City and other offices around the world, were interviewed by e-mail, chat, e-document exchange, and phone.
- Developing a conceptual framework for describing dynamics for co-located and virtual teams. Dynamics and personal interaction requirements and expectations vary between co-located and virtual team. The conceptual framework will identify dynamics based on data gathered from the interviews and observations.
- Identifying skill sets that are essential for success in a virtual team environment, and developing a skill set improvement model for implementation in team training sessions. Interviews and observations of team members will provide information about skill sets that are needed for effective collaboration and success in a team environment.

## FINDINGS

Preliminary results of this study will be presented at the Southwest Decision Sciences Institute meeting in Dallas in March 2005.

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