



B. Business Impact

Challenges for Tomorrow's Management

Best practices for effective and sustainable virtual working

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Abstract

This impact paper discusses four practices that can help practitioners transition from traditional (physically collocated) to virtual (computer-mediated) working environments: (a) maintaining a virtual social context; (b) selecting technologies according to the task at hand; (c) adopting leadership styles tailored to the virtual environment; and (d) establishing (new) work-life boundaries. The four practices are important not only in terms of transitioning, but more importantly in terms of creating and maintaining a sustainable working environment that can promote productivity and enhance workers' sense of work-life balance over time.

Keywords: Virtual working, Remote working, Digital leadership, Work-life boundaries

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Best practices for effective and sustainable virtual working

There exists a wealth of academic literature on virtual teams (VTs) and virtual working which is generally presented as a geographically dispersed and computer-mediated environment that challenges traditional management theories based on the physically collocated working environment. This literature, developed within the last two decades, takes a focus on temporary VTs that may be formed on the spot for a specific project and are then disassembled upon completion of the project at hand (e.g. Chamakiotis et al., 2020).

Currently, we are witnessing a steep rise in virtual or remote working due to the Covid-19 pandemic which has led to a complete lockdown and a need to work from home for large part of the working population worldwide; a number of organizations across industries had to transition from traditional, physically collocated working into virtual working from home from one day to another and without the necessary preparations in terms of equipment and training. This has led to a widespread challenge, generating uncertainty as to how to create an appropriate working environment at home.

In what follows, I draw on the extant VT literature and my own experience of research and teaching in this area for over a decade, and discuss four practices which can help practitioners to not only transition into virtual working, but more importantly to create a sustainable virtual working environment. Though the VT literature is largely based on temporary VTs whose members do not know one another prior to the VT launch, there are important lessons to be learned, as discussed below.

First practice: maintain a virtual social context!

Not being able to see your colleagues face-to-face does not mean that you should not socialize. Transitioning into virtual working with colleagues with whom you have been working face-to-face means that there exists an established social context already. Given the importance of the social context for the development of trust, the existing social context must be maintained in the virtual environment. VT members have been found to focus too much on work tasks, underplaying the importance of social interactions. In order to maintain a pleasant and constructive culture, the new virtual environment should be designed in a way that promotes informal socialization. A good idea for a team that has 'gone virtual' is to start their meeting with a coffee and have a chat about topics outside work before starting to speak about work.

Second practice: select the 'right' technologies!

Despite the availability of numerous different types of information and communication technologies (ICTs), it is important to understand that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to selecting the right ICTs. Naturally, some of us may tend to select synchronous ICTs, allowing for real-life communication. However, relevant theory suggests that different types of ICTs might be better for different types of tasks (Dennis et al., 2008). Therefore, before establishing the ICTs that could support a specific project, we should recognize which ICTs are likely to serve better the tasks at hand; while synchronous ICTs might work better for a joint brainstorming session online, for example, an asynchronous ICT might be preferable for storing or sharing.

Third practice: adopt suitable (e-)leadership styles!

Though some of us may be experienced leaders in the face-to-face environment, switching into virtual working may require alternative (e-)leadership styles. The following four styles have been presented in the VT literature as pertinent e-leadership styles and they can work either on their own or in combination with one another (Chamakiotis and Panteli, 2017).

- **Centred leadership:** This leadership style is commonly found in traditional (physically collocated) working environments, whereby one person has the overall responsibility for a project from start to end. In digital environments, a centred leader often coexists with another type of leadership, such as the ones presented below.
- **Emergent leadership:** Although an appointed leader may already be in place, in a digital environment we see people emerge as leaders during the lifecycle of a project, either to step in and help with an unexpected task, or because they have expertise in a specific aspect of the project. It is important to allow and encourage colleagues to emerge as leaders, although they may not have been formally appointed as leaders upfront.
- **Shared leadership:** Due to the geographical dispersion characterising digital work, we often see that different individuals lead different stages or different aspects of the project. This is often due to their specific area of expertise and it is usually *successive* in nature, with one leader handing over the baton to another person once they have completed their task.
- **Co-leadership:** While shared leadership is successive in character, co-leadership is a leadership style whereby two or more teammates assume the responsibility for two different tasks (or components of the project) at the same time. Therefore, co-leadership is *simultaneous*, rather than successive.

Fourth practice: revisit work-life boundaries!

Although ICTs are the primary enabler of VTs, offering us unparalleled flexibility and the ability to work from home, they also create problems for us, often referred to as paradoxes: as Mazmanian et al. (2013) have argued, although ICTs give us the opportunity to work anywhere, anytime, we often end up working everywhere, all the time. To protect, therefore, our work-life balance in the context of the Covid-19 lockdown, it is worth considering the following four strategies:

- **Deciding where to work:** Designating a specific space in our homes, within which we can conduct our work, and establishing rules preventing us from working outside that space, can help us create a spatial boundary separating work from non-work activities.
- **Deciding when to work:** Capitalizing on the temporal flexibility offered by ICTs, and in order for us to be able to fulfil both our work and non-work commitments, it may be a good idea to create a working day that is tailored to our personal (and family) circumstances and that might differ significantly from the traditional 9-5 working day.
- **Deactivation or silencing of notifications:** The proliferation of smartphones and mobile technologies has led researchers to conceptualize notifications as 'interruptions' that may disrupt our work activities or create work-life imbalance (Chen and Karahanna, 2014). To minimize the negative effects of such interruptions, one can deactivate or silence all work-related notifications on their personal devices.
- **Different devices for different purposes:** Segmenting work from non-work activities (Sayah, 2013) can be achieved by using separate devices for different purposes, which may help us to 'switch off' and to maintain a sense of work-life balance while in lockdown.

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