

Virtual Factor 1: Geography

The more time you spend working with your team in the same location, the less you have to rely on electronic emails and other types of computer-mediated communication, so the less “virtual” your team is.

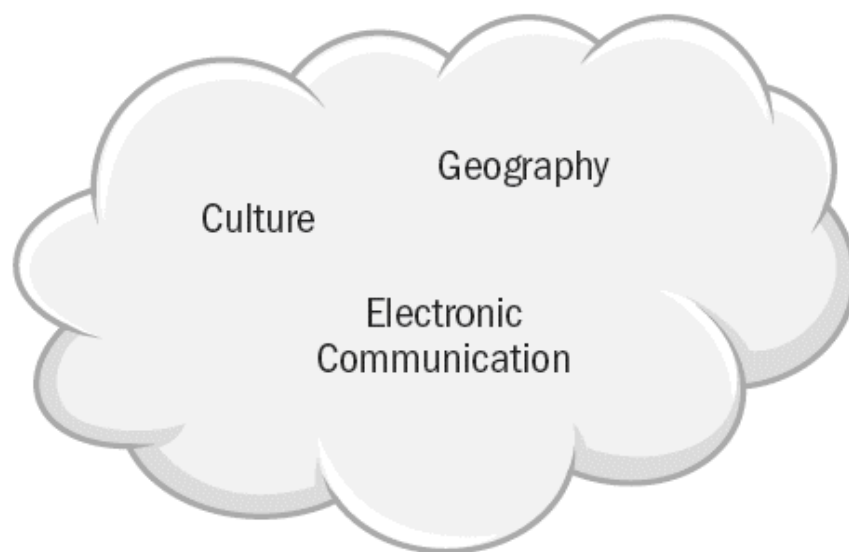


Figure 2.1: The three factors that define a virtual team.

Geography also plays a part in how well a virtual team bonds at the beginning of the project. The more experience individuals have with working in a virtual team, the better they tend to be at it and at starting off from a trusting position which helps build the team quickly. Wise says that offshore outsourcing companies that only work in this way tend to be very good at hitting the ground running because they have a lot of experience with teams where the members are not in the same location. They assume trust and they assume ways of working that automatically suit the virtual model, whereas team members who have not had prior experience of virtual teams will need a bit of time to find their feet with this new approach. Geographic distance can also mean that conflict manifests itself in different ways. This is something that project managers should look out for, as it can be harder to spot. By the time you realize that there is a problem, it could be a much larger issue than if you had noticed two colleagues having an argument in a project team meeting in your office.

Virtual Factor 2: Electronic Communication

“Virtuality is found in how team members work, not in where team members work,” Wise writes.

“Communication is often considered to be an indicator of team virtuality.” Wise reports that about 70% of people say that over half their communications on projects are electronic. This equates to a lot of teams physically located together who are using a “virtual team” approach.

Virtual Factor 3: Culture

Culture is a factor for every team, and project managers work hard to create working cultures that support successful delivery. Diversity, location, and technical literacy make up part of your team’s culture. Your approach to conflict is also a factor in building a team culture. Wise comments that conflict can arise as a result of culture on a virtual team because people don’t perceive themselves to be equal, or find it harder to see equal behavior on a virtual team.

Differences in organizational culture (not national culture) are more likely to cause problems on teams and interfere with knowledge sharing.¹

The Limitations of Online Collaboration

It's important to be aware that technology will not necessarily solve or improve issues of communication in the team. If your team members do not trust each other, do not want to work together, and will not share information, making them do those things via an online tool is not going to improve the performance of the project or their working relationships.

Digital technologies can make it easier to communicate, but they still rely on the individuals involved wanting to work together—or at least being prepared to give it a go. If you have the more fundamental issues of a failing team, don't labor under the impression that slapping a collaboration tool into the mix will resolve your team's problems.