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It's Time for a Virtual Team Driver's License

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We Need A Virtual Team Driver's License

The inherent advantages of global teamwork are so profound, the practice is bound to keep growing - a full 43% of the American workforce already reports that they do at least some work remotely. But you might want to buckle up because virtual teamwork can be a bumpy ride. So why not take a look at how it's being done and think about how to do it better.

If you're not familiar with the idea of virtual teams, it's the practice of bringing people together to form work groups that are not based in your physical office. It could be HQ and a freelancer down the street, or it could be marketing headquarters in Japan with workers spread over continents. In either case, it's a way of working that's becoming pretty well established. At the same time people doing it have some bad habits to break.

At the very least, virtual teamwork is a way to keep far flung workers informed of the company mission, goals, and accomplishments. **At its best, a virtual team brings together your most highly skilled people at exactly the right time to solve critical problems**. By defying time and geography, virtual teams can accomplish what would otherwise be impossible.

What makes a virtual team succeed? Practice. Training. Protocols. An understanding on both ends of 'virtual' that working remotely is unique. It's not just a matter of logging into your meeting software and doing business as usual. Without some rules of the road, that face you're speaking with on your laptop might as well be on another planet. Aren't these technologies supposed to bring us closer together?

It's time to get everyone on the same page. The same chat. The same tracking software. The same schedule. The same expectations. With that accomplished, the power of diverse opinions, styles and vastly different approaches to problem solving can shine and be heard. That kind of recognition and accessibility to a broad base of input is what this is all for.

The global workflow is a traffic jam

Everything, everywhere, all the time *sounded* like a good idea

A decade ago technology made an unwritten promise to business. It went something like this: we're going to build a set of tools based on the Internet that will make your business more efficient, reduce expenses, and give you more time for the vision aspect that all businesses rely on to grow and stay competitive.

The promise was built on continuous connectivity, universal collaboration, a belief in horizontal management and a constantly evolving set of online tools that you have to learn and relearn every couple of months. **The result feels more like a massive traffic jam. Or worse.**

7AM. Smartphone alarm. 15 minutes of email - some urgent because it's from around the world and those teams are headed home shortly. Business before breakfast.

During breakfast. Facebook, messaging and multiple chat channels on the commute. Get to the office and you're already behind because you never caught up with yesterday. Meetings all day. Virtual and otherwise. And just when you're finishing up for the day, another office in another time zone just got started. This may feel like a bad day at work, but it's really a bad *way to work*.

There are three basic problems associated with working this way. Data overload. Communication overload. And cognitive overload. For a complete description with added suggestions about how to deal with these issues both for individuals and for your team, see "Triple Overload and What You Can Do About It"[1].

How did we get here?
Virtual reality is not a game

The dependence on virtual teams is growing, and at the same time, the evolution of the new technologies they depend on far outpaces our ability to take full advantage of them. Until we do our homework, the expectations and the possibilities of virtual teamwork will be only partially fulfilled.

How do we get out of here?
Get some skills

Before you can drive a car you have to learn the rules and take a test, on paper and on the road. It's really a good idea to know which side of the street to drive on and what a stop sign means. The same is true for virtual teams. You can imagine what would happen to virtual teamwork if each person chose their own communication

channels, their own idea of what's urgent and what isn't, and their own notion of what's expected of each member of the team. It's an accident waiting to happen.

Rules of the road for virtual teamwork

Get your virtual team running smoothly

Virtual teams, distributed teams, and remote teams are basically the same thing. They are groups with shared tasks who are not in the same place physically. Making this work well is only partly about the technology. It also takes special management skills. Let's look at three business practices that benefit from including the virtual team perspective.

Virtual Team Hiring	Virtual Team Onboarding	Virtual Team Communications

If you apply these ideas across your entire organization, virtual teamwork will be what you wanted it to be in the first place.

Hiring the right drivers

A great virtual team is like a sports car

It's fast. It's finely tuned. And it's not for everyone. To be able to work remotely requires people who are more self-motivated and independent. In addition to the required core, role-related skills, here's what to look for in ideal remote employees:

+ Self-management skills (good time management, good energy management)

+ Above-average self-motivation

+ Very strong oral and written communication skills

+ Naturally proactive

+ High level of integrity

+ Ability to thrive under a low-touch, highly flexible management style

+ Being okay without a regular, social workplace environment

+ Affinity for different forms of communication technology

These employees usually desire flexible schedules in order to be their most efficient.[2,3] The freedom to balance their workload and extracurricular activities gives these team members the necessary motivation and drive. The balance is important because it also gives them the freedom to know when to stop,[4] which is just as important as being able to stay on task and work hard.

How to find the best candidates. In order to find these ideal remote employees, it is worthwhile to shape the interviewing process differently compared to your search for a 'local' employee. With remote applicants, start with these two techniques before moving on to your standard interviewing phase:

Check for verbal articulation skills. In remote teams much of the communication happens on the phone. So, when you have spotted a potential candidate, start with a 30-minute telephone call to discover how they verbally articulate. In addition, a call prevents you from forming any unconscious biases (e.g. body language, designer outfit, haircut, etc.). When working in virtual

teams, clear and professional diction is fundamental. If the candidate does not demonstrate this skill, you may want to save some time and end the interview here.

Check for listening skills. Equally important is the ability to actively and attentively listen. In the same telephone interview, ask the candidate to respond to two relatively simple questions via email. Ask the candidate to repeat each question in the email and respond to each in no more than 5 sentences. It isn't about the candidates' answers, but how well they listen to the instructions. Does he/she actually repeat the questions? Are there really no more than 5 sentences? You'd be surprised how well the email responses can reveal great listeners from poor listeners. And if a candidate didn't listen well during a job interview, how well do you think they'll listen in meetings when they're a remote participant?

If you hire someone who's not a good listener, you're simply headed for more misunderstandings and chaos. Dr. Beat Bühlmann's 10 years of experience in administering this test during job interviews revealed that about 60% of applicants fail to listen and follow the instructions that they were given.

Getting to know the team

A virtual team is still a human team

Best practice. Face-to-face onboarding. All too often, new members are added to a virtual team by a short introduction email or conference call and this is the only introduction they have to the rest of the group. As they try to get up to speed

quickly and learn the new tools, processes, and materials needed for their job, they won't have the luxury of just turning to a desk neighbor or catching someone in the hall for help. We recommend you consider face-to-face onboarding for a few specific and useful advantages:

+ Understanding the team mission to establish a clear, common direction.

+ Faster and stronger relationship-building with the rest of the team, as well as others in the office.

+ Understanding (or helping to create) defined rules of collaboration.

+ Taking time to get to know each other on a personal level to further strengthen tea bonds through shared interests and better understanding.

Second best practice. Remote onboarding. If a face-to-face introduction is not possible, consider a significant investment in a more extensive, deliberate remote onboarding:

+ Schedule regular, consistent phone calls and video calls, especially in the first 90 days. Use the time to build the relationship with positive, get-to-know one another conversations.

+ Take notes on all of the interview documents and onboarding materials.

+ It doesn't have to be all about business. Sharing personal stories, hobbies, family info, etc helps to build strong foundation for a relationship.

Whether the onboarding is face-to-face or remote, a new hire should definitely have a designated co-worker to rely on for all of the things a new person may need to discover along the way.

Other countries, other customs. Team members in separate offices may have different responsibilities, commitments, constraints, or restrictions. They may be

subject to different employment laws or have varying holiday policies. Sometimes these offices will have different infrastructure and cultural considerations, and individuals may have different religious obligations. It is particularly important for all virtual team members, especially managers, to learn about these differences and share what they learn to help the local teams and individuals feel included in the larger organization.

MIssion-critical clarity. The success of a virtual team also requires total clarity of roles and responsibilities. Ideally, this is part of the onboarding process, regardless of whether it's remote or in person. Effective role clarity must include goals and milestones for each team member, with clear measurements for success. As a result, defining granular tasks and setting up regular check-in meetings (e.g. 1-to-1's) is important not only for the work output, but also for team members' peace of mind.

And when it comes to team communication there's a simple rule that is proven to boost productivity. Define roles and responsibilities using the 3 Ws:

Who does **W**hat by **W**hen

This has been extensively tested and here are the results. In either verbal or written communication, including the who, what, and when helps things move forward faster. When one or more of the 3 Ws are missing, the conversation will likely dead-end, or require follow up.

How remote teams stay on track

Using the right channel for the right reason

If your house was on fire, you wouldn't send an email to bring the fire fighters. In other words, the right choice of communication channel is essential. Every communication channel has its advantages and disadvantages. The key to effective communication is to use what's best for the situation. How can this work for virtual teams?

Virtual team members can miss a lot. When you're not in the same room, speaking face-to-face, you don't have the benefit of seeing body language and or catching nuances in a conversation, which increases the risk of misunderstandings and miscommunication significantly.[5,6] We've found the best solution is to agree on a set of jointly shared communication techniques, behaviors, and technical systems.

(In the attached appendix, you can see a Team Communication Driver's License example used in teams at Evernote and Google EMEA).

Using commute time wisely. Sometimes it's easier to focus during your commute than it is at the office. Travel time can be great for short catch-up calls. It's a personal touch that can also clarify discussions, prevent misunderstandings, and reduce emails. They're a great way to signal true interest in your virtual team members and build trust.

Addressing the language barrier. Virtual team members don't always share the same native language and many companies choose English as the common language. That's practical. At the same time, team leaders need to remember when

virtual team members are not using their native language. Difficult vocabulary, idioms, and speed may give English speakers a linguistic advantage over non-English speaking team members. If this happens, we recommend reinforcing to the native English speakers on the team that they may need to slow down, speak clearly, and use simpler language. Of course, this is best done during private 1-to-1 sessions and is easily incorporated into onboarding training for all employees.

Making meetings more productive. We all could use more effective meetings. Try these tips[7,8] for virtual team communication and see every meeting, not just those with virtual teams, become more productive:

+ Establishing a regular cadence of meetings with fixed dates makes people feel connected and involved.

+ Ensure every meeting invite includes an agenda so everyone can stay on topic.

+ Help attendees come prepared by including links to reading material that should be reviewed prior to the meeting.

+ Try 30-minute meetings. Be as prepared and brief as possible. Schedule 60-minute meetings only if truly needed.

+ Everyone should feel free to contribute in meetings. The team leader isn't the only one who should be talking. Everyone has achievements and challenges to share. Someone needs to orchestrate the talking time.

+ Agree on which communication channels should be used for each type of meeting.

+ Make the communication technology easy and reliable. If possible, add a video conferencing link to the calendar invite to create additional opportunities for face-to-face interactions.

+ Agree on a virtual place to share documents and on a file and folder nomenclature. Better yet, select tools that enable a shared organizational hierarchy and easy, permissions-based access controls so that everyone sees the same information the same way and at the same time.

- Native English speakers should be made aware of their linguistic advantage. Pay attention to vocabulary and how fast you are speaking when communicating with non-native English speaking team members.

- Create transparency with a dashboard so everyone can see the progress of their own work.

- Save time by making sure meeting space is booked in remote offices as well as your own local office.

- We recommend the 3W rule for any kind of verbal and written communication, especially as action items and decisions are made during meetings: **Who Does What By When.**

# Nothing brings people together like trust

How to build virtual trust

Once you've hired the right people, successfully onboarded the team, and established how you want to communicate, what's next? Becoming a high performing virtual team takes trust. Trust may be even more critical with virtual teams than in any other environment: it's crucial, it's the oxygen.[9]

Virtual team leaders and team members should spend plenty of time building their relationships to help establish a high degree of trust with co-workers. The higher the level of trust, the more psychologically safe people feel, creating a clear positive impact on personal performance.

Types of trust and how to build it. Trust can be divided into interpersonal trust on one hand and task-based trust on the other hand.

BUILDING INTERPERSONAL TRUST	BUILDING TASK-BASED TRUST
• **Sharing Meals**	• **Keeping team commitments to deadlines**
• **Socializing after business hours**	• **Constantly delivering high quality work**
• **Sharing personal information and hobbies**	• **Reliable, helpful, cooperative behaviour**
• **Exchanging pictures**	
• **Non-job-related communication**	

The major difference between the two types of trust lies in the time it takes to develop these different aspects of trust. With interpersonal trust, face-to-face personal connections[10] can be a true trust booster. On the other hand, building trust based on consistently keeping agreements and deadlines, and being a good co-worker takes much longer. The following diagrams illustrate the case:
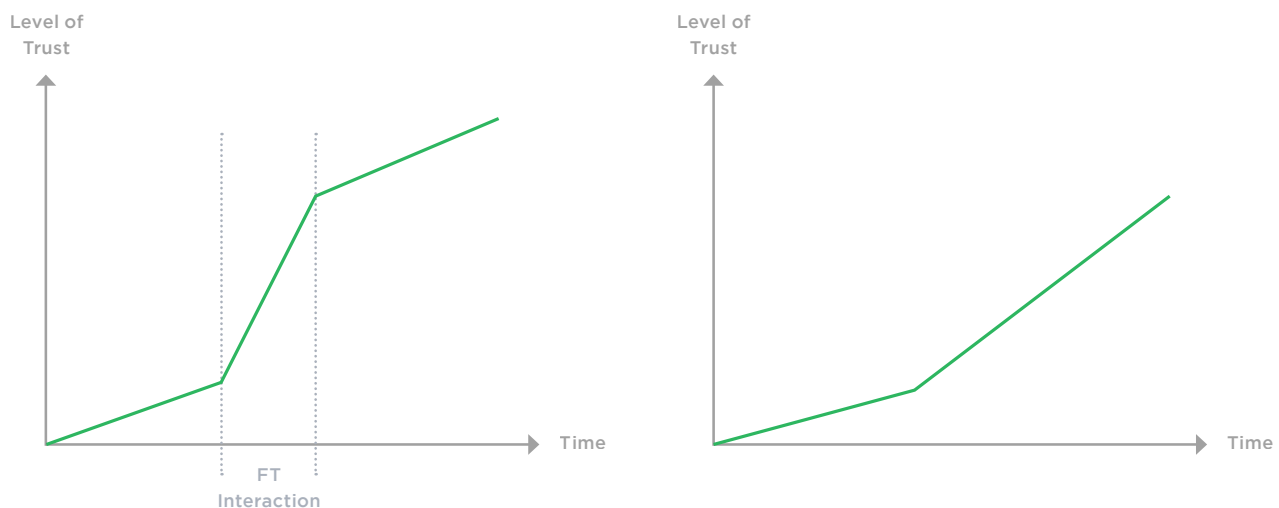
What was there before trust was built? It is commonly argued that trust can be built over time.[11,12,13] If trust can be built over time, what existed before the trust-

building process started? Does trust building with a person always start at zero, or do you attribute (unconsciously) a certain level of trust (aka stereotype)? McKnight et al[14] defines it as initial trust. As soon as a person interacts with another person for the very first time via any communication channel, one automatically and unconsciously allocates a certain level of trust towards the other person. Initial trust levels vary significantly, depending on previous experiences or cultural background.

It can be argued that from a managerial point of view, initial trust is a given, since it is something personal and linked to the individual's previous life experiences before becoming a member of the team. To a certain extent, the initial trust level might be affected by making team members aware of it through discussion, training or practicing mindfulness. However, from a team development perspective, it seems to be more important to know how to build and strengthen trust over time, irrespective of initial trust levels of team members in the beginning.

The realities of building virtual trust

+ **Hold an early kick-off meeting.** This is an excellent starting point for building relationships and trust. These "getting-to-know-each-other" sessions don't have to be only about business. There should also be time for relaxed chats about family, interests, professional background, aspirations, etc. It gives members more reasons to keep in touch with colleagues individually or as a team, and builds interpersonal trust from the very beginning.[15,16]

+ **Leading by example and keeping agreements.** The virtual team leader influences the mood and energy of the team. The way this person interacts, listens, and speaks has an impact on everyone. Keeping agreements and meeting deadlines may sound basic, but simply doing what was agreed upon, makes a difference. "Sorry, I could not do it, I was too busy" is a statement we hear too often and it undermines trust building.

+ **Honest sharing of successes and failures.** These sharing sessions are important, not only for the individual growth but also for team spirit. A frank discussion of misses and fails is also a positive way to keep a group honest, and focused on learning from mistakes.

+ **Leadership from the bottom up.** Virtual team leaders need to make a specific effort to keep virtual team players talking. It's part of the job. As soon as remote team members start to feel like they're in a distant silo, or that what they are doing isn't important to the group, productivity will definitely suffer. In other words, find ways to give everyone an opportunity to speak up.

Are you ready to get your license?

This can be business in the fast lane

Get ready. There will be a quiz! So, what are the most important skills required to get a virtual team driver's license?

+ Understanding and sharing technology platforms

+ Knowing how and when to use them

+ Hiring people that fit the remote profile

+ Making emotional connections where physical connections are impossible

+ Being respectful of various global cultures

+ Making a total effort to stay connected

And ultimately….

+ **Doing better work**

The goal of virtual team work is to gather up the people with the best skills, wherever they are, share a common goal, and by defying time and geography, do amazing work. Hopefully the experiences and techniques mentioned here will help make that happen.

Appendix

Example for a Communication "Driver's License"
(AKA Team Communication Charta)

Intro

As we are a new team and everyone of us is based in a different location and some of us even in a different time zone, ewe should agree upon some communication rules, expectations and best practices. Of course, we can review if something does not seem to work as expected!

Calendar Hygiene and Expectations

+ We do reply to calendar invitations (within 24h)

+ We add travel time from and to an external meeting

+ We make our calendars public. Booking meetings is much easier for everyone - easy to understand if a meeting can be postponed or not

+ We add a video conference link to every meeting with remote participants

+ We consider different time zones

    • London: UTC

    • Stockholm, Hamburg, Paris: UTC +1h

    • Dubai: UTC +4h

+ We consider different weekends
+ London, Stockholm, Hamburg, Paris: Sat & Sun
+ Dubai: Fri & Sat

Email Hygiene and Expectations

+ First think if email is needed, then talk before email is sent, then send email if needed

+ Let's not discuss via email. The email channel is not urgent: 12h - 24h response time is ok

+ For truly urgent or critical things, we call or ping each other

+ As email is not urgent, no need to reply to emails after 19h and during weekends

+ No need to check emails during vacation, unless otherwise agreed upon

+ We all have decent OOO replies: including return date from OOO / back-up contact and details / back-up person gets a briefing

+ Being brief in email amongst ourselves is ok

+ No need to reply to an FYI email (e.g. saying thanks) - you can, but don't have to

+ Let's be ambitious -> No scrolling in emails - that's a sign that the email is too long

Meetings in General

+ We come prepared to meetings - if not, we tell others (and if needed, reschedule the meeting)

+ Meeting follow-up actions must contain the three Ws: **WHO** does **WHAT** by **WHEN**

+ The meeting organiser is responsible for:
  - Setting & communicating the agenda
  - Taking notes or finding a note taker
  - Follow-up actions are written down and shared

+ Meetings start on time and stop on time

Video Conferencing

+   We make sure we have a stable network connection

+   If device performance is bad we free up devices resources (e.g. close programmes)

+   Mute should be default, unmute to speak

+   In hangouts with multiple attendees we watch for requests to speak and ask for comments / questions. Not only the loudest voice gets air time

+   We don't close a hangout in an abrupt manner

Collaboration

+   Please put any document (which is not secret) in our shared E-team folder

+   Think about what everyone can benefit from and share widely valuable emails/documents - this includes sharing both with the rest of the team or outside of the team

Further Reading

2018

https://hbr.org/2018/01/how-to-build-trust-with-colleagues-you-rarely-see%E2%80%AC

2017

https://hbr.org/2017/11/how-to-let-go-at-the-end-of-the-workday

https://hbr.org/tip/2017/07/go-out-of-your-way-to-establish-trust-on-your-virtual-team

https://www.westuc.com/en-us/blog/conferencing-collaboration/4-ways-avoid-collaboration-overload

2014

https://hbr.org/2014/12/getting-virtual-teams-right

Resources

[1] https://evernote.com/triple-overload-challenge

[2] https://remote.co/10-stats-about-remote-work/

[3] https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnewman/2017/10/10/5-key-practices-of-successful-remote-work-teams/#271d0f005168

[4] https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnewman/2017/10/10/5-key-practices-of-successful-re-mote-work-teams/#271d0f005168

[5] https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/lindred-greer-why-virtual-teams-have-more-conflict

[6] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042813051069

[7] https://www.amazon.de/Manage-Virtual-Theory-Practice-Nutshell/dp/3867270724

[8] https://www.forbes.com/sites/yec/2017/07/06/five-mistakes-to-avoid-when-managing-remote-teams/#7aab0e299d43

[9] https://hbr.org/tip/2017/07/go-out-of-your-way-to-establish-trust-on-your-virtual-team

[10] FTF: Face-to-face

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[14] McKnight, D. H., Cummings, L. L. & Chervany, N. L. 1998, ' Initial trust formation in new organizational relationships', Academy of Management Review, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 473-490.

[15] https://hbr.org/2014/03/get-your-virtual-team-off-to-a-fast-start

[16] http://virtualteamintelligence.com/virtual-team-tips/virtual-team-kick-off-initiation-meeting

About the Authors

York Scheunemann worked in several Online Marketing and Digital Consulting businesses since 2001 and lead international teams before he joined Google in 2009. He is now Head of Engagement EMEA at Google Digital Academy and is consulting companies on Digital Transformation. As a team lead of people who are based across the region he personally knows what it means to interact and lead in a virtual world.

As co-author, speaker and instructor in Yoga & Meditation, York has a profound knowledge and expertise in living mindfully in the business world and how to bring people on the journey of transformation. As a father of 3 sons, as a growth driver, as a purpose seeker, pragmatism lover and generalization rejecter, York acts as an everyday life transformer & coach.

Dr. Beat Bühlmann is General Manager EMEA at Evernote. He started his career at Hewlett Packard in Zurich, followed by Dell in Geneva and Google in London and Zurich. Beat grew up in a country-side, family-run hotel and started his career with a 4-year apprenticeship as car mechanic. He further holds a Swiss engineering degree in computer science, an EMBA (Zurich), and a Doctorate in Business Administration (Adelaide). Beat holds teaching assignments at IMD Lausanne, Harvard Extension School, Swiss-Board-School, Uni Zurich, Uni St. Gallen, is a book author, and board member of 2 companies. For more than 15 years, Beat has actively been researching virtual teams in theory and practice and published the management book 'Need to manage a virtual team? Theory and practice in a nutshell' (ISBN 978-3-867-270-724, link). Further, in 2017, Beat published his 2nd book about personal development called 'Become the CEO of Your Own Life' (ISBN 978-3-736-994-980, link), showing a simple but effective way to combine work and private life in a meaningful way.