

Virtual Project Management: Leveraging Digital Resources to Lead Effective Projects ¹

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Adapt to the “new normal” of remote work and virtual project teams to accomplish project goals

In the winter of 2020, our project team faced a tight timeline for a large-scale digital transformation effort. As COVID-19 cases trickled upwards across the country, the team had to quickly adapt its onsite instructional training to digital and align the scope of the project with the client and project team remotely. Many project teams have faced, and are currently facing, the challenges of evolving their projects to a remote environment. The “new normal” of virtual teams opens a host of opportunities while enhancing risks to project milestones, quality, cost, and scope.

Virtual Team Benefits

While this quick adjustment to the project led to short-term struggles, it did open a number of individual, team, and client benefits.

As an individual, I was able to save nearly an hour and a half of commute time and repurpose that time to working on the project, self-care, and spending time with my family. Time and frustration spent in traffic was no longer lost productivity. Being home enabled me to take micro-breaks and recharge with smiles and hugs from my five-month old daughter. Moreover, I no longer felt restricted to trying to fit all work into the traditional workday schedule. The silver lining of being part of a virtual team was more family time, greater comfort, and a more flexible schedule.

While it took some time initially to calibrate, the team was able to align work schedules, cadence, and work productively. People were able to reallocate commute time to the project and addressing other needs and adjusted their time to meet the needs of the project team. When we needed to crash project resources on certain areas, the team was able to align hand-offs so that personnel were able to get up early or work later and finish an aspect of the project before handing it off to other project experts or the client for review.

Several members of our team were already working remotely prior to COVID outbreaks. This enabled our team to not be bounded or limited by geography when making hiring considerations. Having a broader radius for talent enabled our project team to identify strong performers with the skills needed to drive project results.

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With onsite instruction transitioning to digital training, the client was able to save thousands in travel costs for the nearly thirty people who would have needed to travel for a four-day training. Digital training was recorded to provide learning artifacts for the client. Moreover, the blended learning model enabled the client to learn at their own pace and enabled them to limit the opportunity costs of their time and hours spent in an on-site instructional training.

Acclimating to a virtual team environment can open opportunities for flexibility, productivity, and comfort, but it also opens a number of risks and challenges to the project team.

Virtual Team Risks

Being mindful of the risks of virtual work can lead to better planning and risk mitigation. We certainly experienced our share of these risks.

Digital communication platforms like Zoom are not always the best substitution for a face-to-face conversation. While these platforms do enable you to capture crucial body language features such as tone and facial expressions (a step up from the phone or chat function), project teams do miss out on the more personal touch and added body language of posture. Digital distance can lead to challenges in communicating with the client and amongst the team and can pose a challenge to relationship-building. Moreover, these platforms can sometimes be unreliable when a lot of members are using at once. We actually had one virtual training drop and needed to be restarted because the platform's bandwidth was overtaxed. This led to some momentary confusion and loss of flow. Be prepared for Murphy's Law to surface and bandwidth issues to occur at the worst possible moment and have a plan communicated in case critical virtual meetings do drop.

Morale can certainly be affected as team members and the client may be bearing a heavier burden while working remotely. Team members and the client may not have adequate childcare, may be facing added anxiety and stress over the pandemic, and may miss the emotional recharge of connecting with co-workers at the proverbial water cooler. Calendars can quickly be overloaded with meetings leading to digital fatigue and team members can be stuck in a work vortex forgetting to take breaks for self-care or to recharge. Make sure employees are building in breaks throughout their day so that they do have time to refresh from screen time. Designate some time to checking in with team members to learn how they are adjusting and to connect on a more personal level.

Members of the project may lack immediate resources for remote work. For instance, team members or the client may not have the benefits of a home office or even a comfortable working environment. Internet access could be pushed to its limits with multiple people now using the internet for work and educational needs. Distractions can also crop up and pull project members away, causing them to be less productive. Be mindful of these limitations and be aware of what your company can provide to help mitigate some of these issues. For instance, is there money that the company sets aside for setting up a home office? Should there be policies in place to reimburse employees for certain home office-based accommodations?

Accountability can dwindle as it can become more difficult to monitor progress, conduct walk-arounds and check-ins, and maintain a sense of camaraderie. Procrastination or the inability to connect in-person can cause hand-offs to slide and project timelines to shift. Moreover, remote teams may face time zone distinctions. One remote team that I am currently supporting has a nine-hour difference between one team member and the client and the majority of the team is operating six hours behind the client. This may require flexibility in planning, adjustments to the workday, and recognition of each team members' time zone. Setting a common meeting time block can help address these challenges.

As project teams adjust to a digital environment and seek to maintain productivity and effectiveness during a sustained period of remote work, they need to preemptively identify risks and strengthen systems for accountability, communication, and support.

Lessons Learned: 3 Best Practices for a Virtual Team

To better capture the benefits of a virtual team while limiting the risks, a project manager can (1) Build Culture, (2) Establish Communications Cadence, (3) Leverage Accountability Systems.

(1) Build Culture

Lacking face-to-face communications and the camaraderie of on-site huddles can lead to issues with morale and team culture. Culture can be built by taking a servant-leader approach and showing empathy for each project team members' circumstances. Virtual one-on-one coffee breaks with team members can enable the project manager to learn how remote work is impacting team members. Are team members juggling work and watching their kids? Are team members struggling with less than ideal working conditions? Are team members requiring more flexible working schedules? These conversations can build transparency, trust, and enable the project manager to meet their project team and the client where they are. Just as a project manager might conduct a stakeholder analysis and maintain a stakeholder matrix, information from these sessions can be captured and incorporated into broader communications cadences and systems to improve culture and results.

(2) Establish Communications Cadence

Regular communications will help strengthen culture and build accountability. Setting regular communications norms such as a daily team huddle or blocked times for work and for meetings can help institute valuable standards. This communications cadence can enable the team to follow scrum principles such as the ability to self-organize, identify, and proactively resolve issues, control and adapt the processes, and be transparent in connecting the dots of their deliverables. This cadence can enable the team to collaborate, prioritize, and set time standards for completing aspects of the project. As part of this cadence, the project team may want to establish certain celebrations or routines. Perhaps on certain days, people appear on video (or appearing on video could be mandatory). Project teams can contribute to culture by having theme

days (fun background, favorite hat, show your pet) days. A regular cadence needs to be established with the client to build report, manage expectations, and partner to solve challenges. Use this communications cadence to track progress, recognize contributors, and troubleshoot issues.

(3) Leverage Accountability Systems

Combat procrastination and sliding timelines by utilizing project management tools such as JIRA, Basecamp, Microsoft Project or other project management software to set milestones, prioritize resources, and track progress. While establishing a culture of transparency and collaboration and establishing a communications cadence will certainly drive accountability, the project manager should document roles, responsibilities, and expectations for the project team and guide the team. Project managers should provide the team with a structure and have visibility into what the project team and members are responsible for. In some circumstances, the project manager may need to establish micro-targets where certain aspects of the project are completed and turned around for review in a short period of time. The project manager may also consider time-boxing tasks to bound when something needs to be completed. Teams will continue to follow basic project management principles and can leverage tracking tools, regularly review these tools, and use the communications cadence to address issues.

Remote Teams for the Foreseeable Future

Many companies are seeing the benefits of remote work through cost-savings, productivity, and quality of life benefits. Tech giants are instituting long-term policies for remote work and many companies are considering remote project teams beyond COVID-19. As remote project teams become the “new normal” be sure to make time to build team culture and community, be flexible while also being mindful of each individual’s working style and work-life boundaries, and conduct regular reviews to improve communications and systems. For virtual teams to truly optimize remote work benefits, communication needs to be enhanced to increase trust, transparency, and collaboration. Just like any project, communication and continuous improvement are essential. Listening, learning, and implementing feedback upfront can help the project manager to better manage time, cost, scope, and quality and lead an overall more effective project.

About the Author



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Evan Piekara, MBA, PMP is a consultant and project manager with nearly 15 years of experience leading strategy, change management, and digital transformation efforts. Evan leverages change management and project management principles in working with government, nonprofit, and commercial clients to solve complex business challenges, align actions, and optimize impact. Evan holds an undergraduate degree from Connecticut College, a Master's in the Science of Teaching from Pace University, and an MBA from Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business. Evan is passionate about using business to support his community and currently serves on the boards of four nonprofits. He is the author of *Case In Point: Government and Nonprofit*.

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