Managing the Virtual Workforce Requires Knowledge of Communication Behavior

by TAMARA L. GILLIS, ED.D., ABC
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Over the past decade, working remotely from clients' offices, telecommuting and working on the road have become common work arrangements, according to Ann M. Mayer-Guerr, author of "Characteristics, Communication Patterns and Organizational Identification Levels of Remote Workers."

As the number of remote workers increases globally, assumptions are often made about their work habits, behaviors and preferences.

In her research, Mayer-Guerr found significant differences between remote and non-remote workers concerning organizational identification and other factors. She identified training as an important variable in overcoming communication problems and in solving other issues common to the virtual workforce.

The IABC Research Foundation’s newest release, “Communication Behavior of Virtual Workforces,” can help managers solve some of these concerns that arise in managing the virtual workforce.

The research team for this project includes academic scholars and communication practitioners: Mayer-Guerr, Krishna Kandath, Ph.D., Everett M. Rogers and John Oetzel. Their final report, available from IABC, includes a review of current intelligence concerning the behavior, attitudes and work patterns of virtual workers, as well as a training manual for managers who currently supervise or will be supervising remote employees.

MANAGING VIRTUAL EMPLOYEES

For those seeking understanding of virtual workforce issues in depth, the new report provides an annotated bibliography of current scholarly literature, including perspectives from communication, management, organizational development and management of information systems, as well as insights into the research team’s approach to this project.

The team conducted a content analysis of the scholarly literature to enhance understanding of communication in virtual workforces. Their extensive research ultimately led to creation of the training manual that accompanies this report.

Based on an exhaustive inventory of propositions, the preliminary propositional inventory was developed through a content analysis of the identified literature. In creating the training manual, the researchers focused on the issues of immediate importance to the workplace and identified five principal areas/topics of interest:

> comparative advantages of using computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication
> comparative disadvantages of using computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication
> similarities between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication
> outcomes of training on communication in virtual workforces
> gender differences and their influence on communication in virtual organizations.

DEVELOPING THE TRAINING MANUAL

According to the research team, organizations that rely on virtual workers have five main areas of concern: managing interpersonal conflicts; building trust, commitment and self-efficacy; and
managing gender and cultural differences among the virtual workforce and their in-office co-workers.

The manual delves into those concerns by providing communication practitioners with presentations and training exercises, discussion questions and a questionnaire for assessing the communication behavior of virtual employees.

Specifically, the report focuses on three vital areas: the value of and differences between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication; civil communication and conflict management in virtual environments; and identification and management of gender and cultural differences.

The researchers gained access to Philips Semiconductors in Albuquerque, N.M., USA, as a pilot test site for the training manual. Working with Philips's global workforce, the research team was able to explore further cultural differences among workers. The team also tapped the expertise of outside training and development consultants to comment on the confidence of the training model.

"The first two areas of our manual are developed from three key propositions in our inventory," explain the authors. "Our third area in the manual is developed from the fifth proposition. At the recommendation of team members at Philips, however, we also added [a section on] how to manage cultural differences. More organizations are multicultural (based on ethnicity, race or nationality, to name some categories), and certainly trainers would benefit from this aspect of virtual communication as well."

Pilot testing the training manual heightened the research team's sensitivity to the different types of virtual workers. The format of the final manual, the treatment of the topics and the accessible language level used are evidence of insights gained along the way. The result is a valuable foundation for developing training workshops on communication behavior of virtual employees and their office-bound counterparts.

**CREATING A COHESIVE WORKFORCE**

"Clearly, the reviewed studies reveal that different contexts present different experiences and that, concomitantly, individuals have varying experiences," the research team reports. "Our training manual addresses the perceived gaps between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication in order to demonstrate that these gaps can be overcome through training."

The researchers conclude that appropriate training improves (a) communication; (b) employees' perceptions of the interaction process over time, especially with regard to trust, commitment and candidness between members; and (c) remote work self-efficacy.

In keeping with the IABC Research Foundation's mission, "Communication Behavior of Virtual Workforces" provides communication practitioners, as well as training and development practitioners, background and a working manual for understanding virtual employees as well as implementing programs to improve the work environment for remote employees and their office-bound counterparts.

As more multi-national organizations rely on the productivity of virtual employees for their corporate success, understanding the special circumstances of these employees and ultimately avoiding common pitfalls in communication and training with this growing workforce sector will strengthen organizations for the future.