

The perfect virtual workmate



Plenty has been written about the personalities that make up the perfect team. But what if the team members never meet face to face? Alex Fradera introduces the psychology behind virtual groups

What makes collaboration possible? Social psychologists agree that harmonious groups are made up of people who think they're similar to each other. While early research focused on surface-level similarities, like age or gender, recent research suggests it's more important to share deeper features, such as values.

Wanted: stable, agreeable, conscientious extroverts

But there are also certain personality traits that make effective collaboration with others easier. Teams perform better when their members are more extroverted (social, talkative), emotionally stable (less inclined to worry), agreeable (keen to cooperate, not boss others about), and conscientious (disciplined and organised).

And it helps if the group shares these qualities. Specifically, teams tend to do worse when members vary wildly in agreeableness and conscientiousness. This is understandable, as these reflect fundamental differences in how people treat each other and deliver shared objectives – differences not easily put aside.

For other traits such as extroversion, meanwhile, variety doesn't appear to harm groups. And for creative activities, team diversity may actually be an advantage.

Openness to experience – denoting curious and imaginative qualities – is generally associated with more creative results. Yet studies suggest that teams that are best at creative tasks contain at least one person who is less open to experience, who can contain and shape the wilder ideas.

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When collaboration went virtual, sacrificing face-to-face contact to connect people over distances, researchers initially thought it would impoverish communication. Yet subsequent work shows that over time, teams relying on virtual communica-



Managers need to allow their virtual workforces the time to bond and build trust as though they were in the same office.

tion can compensate for absent cues like body language, and keep interactions rich enough to sustain close-working teams. Moreover, technology can be an equaliser in discussions, giving more introverted people space to contribute and offering back channels so information can flow in parallel to the main conversation.

Can I trust you, virtual colleague?

However, it can be hard to develop full trust in collaborators you haven't met. Trustability is key, rather than capacity to trust. A trustworthy person may win over a suspicious one, whereas even a trusting soul may keep a suspect individual at bay. Trustability emerges from seeing someone as competent, which we can glean from virtual interactions, and also benevolent, putting the best interests of others first – something hard to get a sense of in virtual situations.

Trust matters, as geographically separated teams are more prone to misunderstandings. It's been seen that conflict can come from behaviour that seems unremarkable when witnessed, but from afar seems puzzling and gets attributed to false motives. Trust also lets members ask for help when they need it, without worrying about being judged for revealing their vulnerabilities.

Different strokes for different collaborators

Personality interacts with technology-assisted

collaboration in two more ways. First, people have differing appetites for new technology. This is partly down to confidence in their own proficiency, but also influenced by personal reactions: computer anxiety on the one hand, and on the other, computer playfulness, the readiness to use a new system for its own sake. Finding systems intrinsically enjoyable helps people overcome learning bumps so they engage more deeply.

Finally, people differ in how they share knowledge. Those willing to share see it as an obligation that helps meet group goals. They're dutiful, sharing information when specifically asked to, and expect others to do the same. Those who are eager to share feel allegiance to the subject matter, not the group. They're enthusiasts, geeks even, sharing information proactively, whether solicited or not, and looking for acknowledgement from their peers plus heightened reputation. People with these different attitudes to sharing knowledge will interact with a mass-collaborative, wkinomic world in very different ways.

From a psychological point of view, all these factors – how we collaborate, how we communicate, how we're trusted by others and how we share information – are differences that feed into a virtual collaborative environment.

Getting to know you

Working with people we don't meet messes with our human programming. So the tools we use have to help replace social glue, says [Dr Nicola Millard](#), customer experience futurologist at BT Global Services

For collaboration to happen, trust is vital.

We're used to building trust with colleagues by seeing them in meetings or chatting to them in the canteen or round the water cooler. Yet many of our work trends are pulling away from these traditional trust-building situations – people work from home, projects are run online and you may work with people you've never met who are in another part of the world.

And there are contradictory forces here. For example, we know that if you want to get innovative ideas then the last thing you want is to sit in a room with people you see every day, who know each other well and have the same world view. But as soon as we're in a diverse group with mixed ages, cultures and disciplines, our brains are challenged. They've evolved to work in tribes and to trust the people we see every day and who look similar to us. If we can't see someone and don't know them, then it's easier for our brain to stereotype them.

Creating fast trust and social glue

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So I'm investigating how the tools we have can create a kind of 'fast trust'. How we can collaborate better given that we can't physically get together. How we can develop the kind of social glue that we need to work well with other people.

Collaborative tools vary in how much they can help create that social glue. An audio call can be good but an audio conference can be too task focused to develop relationships and many participants don't get a say. Also, without body language you can get misunderstandings. Video conferences might seem like the obvious answer and they can certainly be a great tool, but some people can feel self-conscious of what the camera is picking up or find it intrusive.

I have a colleague who used to do two regular calls with his team each week – one was task-related, the other was for a chat about what they were all doing in their free time, just to build up that social glue.

Social media is not that rich a tool for relationship building, but it can be a good way to give people a bit more idea of what someone is like. If you have a page that gives your photo, shows what you've studied and worked on, and what your interests are, then it will really help people relate to you.

Then there are companies' own social networks with forums and discussion groups that let people ask questions to a wider group, beyond their team or department and the conventional silos. Some managers still see these forums as 'time wasting' so there needs to be a willingness in management to create communities where people talk and to encourage it. And that kind of collaboration needs to be rewarded.

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So while it can often be impractical to meet up face-to-face in today's world, we do at least have a range of tools open to us – audio, video, social media and real-time instant messaging, which let you have a conversation with someone.

Email – the collaboration killer

The one thing that I think makes a terrible collaboration tool is email.

Email is so ingrained in most corporate cultures but it is full of problems. I've limited my email time to half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening to avoid the endless to and fro of cc'ing on emails. It can also be easy to misread the tone of what's written in an email, causing endless misunderstandings. And if you want to brainstorm a new project, sending a message out on social media will get you far more responses than sending an email round to your old list of names.

So we need to get to know the tools and get to know each other, and start building that social glue that we all need.