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Abstract of Diploma Thesis

Features of Communication in Virtual Teams

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Summary

The aim of the diploma thesis is to analyze communication among virtual team members as well as to examine if there are differences in communication between members of virtual teams and traditional organizations. Additionally, the diploma thesis is aimed at identifying the negative or positive features of communication among virtual team members. In theoretical part of the diploma thesis the main characteristics and process of communication are examined as well as concept of virtual team, its characteristics, advantages and disadvantages, as well as barriers to communication in virtual teams and traditional organizations and solutions to improve communication suggested in literature. The practical part of the diploma thesis is focused on the own survey, evaluation of its results. A questionnaire and an interview were chosen as data collection techniques. Based on the survey results evaluation recommendations to improve communication in virtual teams were proposed.

Keywords: virtual team, communication, teamwork, research, questionnaire, features of communication, communication barriers, communication tools

Aims

As it was mentioned, the aim of the diploma thesis is to analyze communication among virtual team members as well as to examine if there are differences in communication between members of virtual teams and traditional organizations. Additionally, the diploma thesis is aimed at identifying the negative or positive features of communication among virtual team members. In the event that negative features are discovered, then the goal of the thesis is to refer to them and suggest recommendations to eliminate or reduce their impact on the effectiveness of communication between members of virtual team.

To meet the aims of the diploma thesis four following research questions were formulated:

1. Does communication among surveyed workers of virtual teams have any differences with communication among surveyed workers of a traditional organization?
2. What are the similarities and differences in communication among surveyed workers of virtual teams and traditional organizations?
3. Are there any positive aspects of communication in virtual teams?
4. Are there any negative aspects of communication in virtual teams?

The thesis is divided into 2 parts: literature overview and a practical part.

Methodology

The main sources for the literature overview are materials relating to the mentioned phenomenon collected and carefully examined by theoretical methods such as induction, deduction and comparison.

The first part of diploma thesis is based on relevant professional resources such as articles, books and other documents that were acquired from sources in libraries, different periodicals and web resources.

As for practical part, the research conducted for this thesis focused on software development teams that create products for big software companies such as KeepSoft (Moscow, Russia), Hewlett Packard (Palo-Alto, USA), Kaspersky (Moscow, Russia), Abbyy (Moscow, Russia) and Reksoft (Moscow, Russia).

Due to such characteristics of virtual team as small size and temporary collaboration, it was difficult to find one virtual team to get the appropriate amount of relevant responds for the

research. Hence, it was decided to focus on workers of five large IT companies, mentioned above. All these companies have as co-located employees, as virtual teams creating new products for particular markets or specific needs.

In order to better carry out the needed practical research empirical methods and tools such as questionnaire for the members of software development teams and interview for virtual team leader were used to collect the data.

With the purpose of providing most accurate independent responses, requests for filling out of questionnaires by software developers (regular employees and members of virtual teams) were sent to Human Recourse departments of software companies mentioned above

Questionnaire is composed of 19 closed, semi-closed and open questions. Software developers (regular employees and members of virtual teams) were asked to fill out the questionnaire which was placed on the website www.surveymonkey.com. The number of respondents is 102. Moreover, the needed interview with virtual team leader was done by Skype. During the interview the virtual team leader was asked 10 questions about communication in virtual team and its features, barriers and ways to overcome these barriers.

Given the need for accurate and authentic analysis, the respondents' answers were analyzed through the integrated web survey service tools (SurveyMonkey). To analyze open question answers and the interview document analysis was used.

Findings

In theoretical part of the diploma thesis were examined main characteristics and processes of communication, concept of virtual team, its characteristics, advantages and disadvantages, as well as barriers to communication in virtual teams and traditional organizations and solutions to improve communication suggested in literature.

In practical part of the diploma thesis is focused on the own survey. Obtained from results of survey data let to answer on four research questions, which were formulated to meet the main aim of the diploma thesis.

There were discovered as similarities as differences between communication in traditional organizations and virtual team members. Similarities are the same set of communication barriers that workers face within work; the main communication problem is information overload in both groups; the most used communication tools in both groups are email and telephones, in turn the least used communication tools are the same too - voice mail, voice conferences and social networks for work; the similar level of trust and cohesion in traditional organizations and formed virtual teams, which started to work some time before the survey.

Speaking about differences, the following should be emphasized: in spite of the same set of communication barriers, the intensity or level of these challenges is higher in virtual teams than in traditional organizations; level of information overload as well as other barriers is higher in accordance with received data. Thus, the degree of challenge is different for virtual teams and traditional organizations. In contrast to traditional organizations, majority of new created virtual teams encounter with low-level trust and cohesion at the beginning of collaboration. But after short period of time they are able to overcome these barriers. This assumption is confirmed by the interview with virtual team leader and by obtained data.

There are differences in according to communication tools. In addition to most popular communication means virtual team members use information sharing services and collaboration services as main tools to do namely their job – produce software, write the software code. In

turn, regular employees much often meet each other in person. Due to objective reason (geographical boundaries) face-to-face communication is not available to virtual team members.

The other difference is the fact that virtual team members are more informed and usually have access to necessary information any time due to active usage of information sharing services in comparison with regular employees.

The conducted research discovered the following positive aspects of communication in virtual teams: liberal style of communication with colleagues and superiors, absence of fear and doubts to discuss something or suggest new ideas, developed information sharing, predominantly task-oriented interaction, unobtrusiveness, possibility not to react on message immediately and possibility to send message any time.

Among negative aspects of communication in virtual teams were discovered: time differences limitations, lack of trust and cohesion, information overload, decision-making process requires more time and efforts, misunderstandings due to absence of non-verbal cues, absence of immediate feedback, misunderstandings due to different languages and cultures, technical issues, security of information.

As negative features of communication in virtual team were detected, the following recommendations to eliminate or reduce their impact on the effectiveness of communication between members of virtual team were suggested.

1. Starting face-to-face meetings, conducted at the beginning of new project
2. Code of communication development and control of its implementation.
3. Careful selection of virtual team members.
4. Promotion of social communication and providing the platform for informal interaction.

Implementation of these recommendations should help to overcome the communication barriers among virtual team members and do their job effectively.

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