

Achieving More with Less: A Toolbox for Virtual Managers

By Trenton Hightower

Today's managers are being called upon to do more with less—it's that simple.

Take travel for instance. More and more companies are seeking ways to keep their staff in various locations connected and informed in more cost-effective ways. Face-to-face meetings are fewer and further between, as managers increasingly rely on less expensive and equally efficient technological tools to stay in touch with colleagues around the state, or across the country.

Videoconferencing

When a live visit is not practical or cost-prohibitive, videoconferencing makes a face-to-face meeting possible. Also known as live motion video, this technology allows people at two or more locations to see and hear one another in real time. Using monitors, cameras, microphones and speakers, a videoconferencing system usually relies on a broadband satellite connection to transmit information.

Recent innovations in telecommunications technologies have lowered equipment and transmission costs, making two-way video more feasible than ever before. The benefit? It's almost like being there. The visual connection enhances understanding and helps participants feel connected to one another in a way that less interactive systems cannot.

Teleconferencing

Spontaneous meeting needs are easily accomplished with a conference call. Teleconferences work best for information-sharing; decision-making and training needs are better supported in more interactive formats. You can increase the effectiveness of a telephone conference with a Power Point presentation via the internet, or with a package of materials either mailed or sent electronically in advance. Keep in mind, however, that productive teleconferences rarely last longer than 30 minutes regardless.

CD-ROMS

CD-ROMs present your messages clearly and cost effectively. Many contain narration, pop-up definitions, enlargeable graphics, animation and interactive exercises. The media runs on most personal computers, and some are projector-ready for showing to larger audiences.

Chat Rooms

Chat rooms can be set up online to allow for real-time exchanges as well. Participants can even remain anonymous.

Message Boards

While not particularly interactive, online message boards can also serve as a clearinghouse for ideas, information and problem-solving.

Email

Beware of too much reliance on email messages to staff and colleagues. Some experts declare that email can't even be considered a type of communication. If communication consists of sending, receiving and understanding a message, they say, then email does not meet the standard definition. Without the benefit of tone of voice and body language, there can never be a guarantee that an email message has been understood. Using emoticons to denote nuances of feeling is never accepted in the workplace. Rely as heavily as possible on more interactive methods of communication.

Snail Mail

Don't forget the most traditional method of communicating with off-site staff. Stand-alone materials or packets to support a video-conference can be mailed to staff to optimize their viewing or participation.

Very often, one of these communication technologies will assist the virtual manager. Even more often, however, a combination of these techniques is called for. It is up to each manager to decide which tools, or combination of tools, is the best option under the circumstances.

Keep in mind, too, that sometimes there is no substitute for the face-to-face meeting, regardless of the cost. There are times when it will be necessary to bear the expense to achieve your goals.