VIRTUAL TEAMS
RESTORING THE HUMAN CONNECTION
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VIRTUAL REALISATIONS

IN a recent strengths assessment conducted by our very own Joseph Tan of the Leaderonomics Centre of Engagement Excellence, I learnt that one of my top strengths is connectivity. I wouldn’t say I excel at connecting with others, after all my friend Laura can connect with anyone, any creature (including my four-legged beast Jak who is pretty defective with friends) in a short space of time.

But I would say I thrive on it, and maintain connections with colleagues, friends (and at times foe) for long periods of time regardless of how geographically distant we may be.

So it was with more than an ounce of trepidation that I took on a job several years ago that had me travelling upwards of 70% of my time. It was disruptive to live here on home ground, and teleconferences at all times became the norm. I found myself needing to spend at least three minutes at the start of each call checking in on my colleagues, asking about their children, whatever out of the office jaunt we had the last time we met, the weather! I am heartened to know that I am not alone in thinking that developing friendships with colleagues is a good thing – as our fearless leader Roshan speaks of the importance and benefits of that in our opening article.

Virtual teams really should not be a foreign concept. Even without global corporations, we have been accustomed to working with clients, suppliers, event organisers and the like as a “team” on joint projects. Back in the day when email, WhatsApp, iMessage, and our wonderful technology fuelled creature comforts were non-existent, the art of being understood by phone and fantastic back-of-the-envelope artwork, as well as being on time without a kababillion reminders or Waze, honed our virtual team skills.

A concrete example of a complex virtual team is the network of telemedicine health facilities I used to work with. Imagine the difference it makes to a patient to have his/her X-Ray read within hours as opposed to days, and for junior doctors in remote areas of telemedicine health facilities I used to work with. Imagine the difference it makes to a patient to have his/her X-Ray read within hours as opposed to days, and for junior doctors in remote areas.

So as you pick up your newspaper and make your virtual journey home, ask yourself if you are also deriving a solution.

KAREN NEOH
Editor
leaderonomics.com

1. INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

Whenever there is any significant news going on in the countries your virtual team members are residing, try to make a point to connect with them and strike up a conversation. This helps in showing concern and interest towards their current issues and will strengthen the bond between virtual colleagues.

If possible, turn on the webcam and have “virtual coffee” chats once in a while. It will be a good change from the usual verbal or email communication.

2. THE UNSpoken WORDS

Sometimes when we are in the midst of a virtual conference, not everyone is given equal chance to speak up. Even in the absence of body language, you can only find out if someone is amiss by deliberately reaching out to them.

3. BEING RESPONSIVE

Some virtual teams may feel a sense of isolation as they don’t see their colleagues physically on a daily basis. It would be ideal to respond to their emails or chats in the quickest manner just to make your presence felt by the other party.

4. VIRTUAL HANGOUT PLACE

Just like how Facebook brings friends and families together, it can be done for virtual teams too. Sites like Yammer has similar functions to provide opportunities for asynchronous interactions, especially for teams scattered across the globe in different time zones. Things shared in the “hangout place” can range from posting of wedding photos, sharing of best practices, tracking of team members’ birthdays, etc. This helps people know each other better on a personal level.

5. TRAVEL

This can be done either by traveling to a place together, attending meetings or having an exchange programme for colleagues to experience each other’s culture and enjoy each other’s company. Although this method involves more money, it will definitely be worthwhile to meet your virtual colleagues at least once, as nothing can fully replace the human touch element.

KAREN NEOH
Editor
leaderonomics.com

5 TIPS FOR VIRTUAL TEAMS

BY FOONG SUET LING
suettel.foong@leaderonomics.com

WITH emerging technology trends, the establishment of virtual teams is becoming more popular, especially in multinational companies.

As organisations streamline their processes and tasks, it is no surprise that certain jobs can be outsourced to countries with lower wages and be managed virtually by a team of subject matter experts to improve efficiency and reduce costs. According to Wayne F. Cascio’s research titled Managing a virtual workplace, there are multiple advantages and disadvantages when it comes to working virtually.

Feelings of isolation, cultural issues, and a lack of trust between team members may occur. Here are five tips to mitigate the disadvantages:

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The opinions expressed in this career guide are those of the writers or the people they quoted and not necessarily those of Leaderonomics.

1. “To master the virtual world and make all the elements work together, you have to become the connector… You may need to shift gears, perform tune-ups, realign, and refuel your team’s energy along the way.” – Yael Zofi Hedges

2. “Whether to extend their talent pool, appeal to a younger workforce, or for sustainability, my prediction is that the term ‘virtual manager’ will have a short shelf-life. All management will be, at least in part, virtual.” – Kristi Ferrazzi

3. “However, to make virtual teamwork work this well, you’ll need to move your team to a new set of behaviours, not just to a new generation of technology, with human engagement as the first priority.” – Keith Ferrazzi

4. “When you meet your workmates by the water cooler or photocopier every day, you know instinctively who you can and cannot trust. In a geographically distributed team, trust is measured almost exclusively in terms of reliability.” – Erin Meyer

5. “You can’t play ping pong together, so you build a more tight-knit culture through deeper, shared experiences.” – Walter Chen
By ROSHAN THIRAN

Roshan Thiran is CEO of Leaderonomics, a unique social enterprise focused on inspiring people to leadership greatness. For great teambuilding programmes to enhance friendships and trust in your organisation, email people@leaderonomics.com. You can also access great new tips on leadership at www.leaderonomics.com

**DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND?**

**Camaraderie at Work Increases Productivity and Output**

By ROSHAN THIRAN

roshan.thiran@leaderonomics.com

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**DONALD TRUMP IS WRONG!**

One Christmas, I was given a Donald Trump book as a gift. As I opened it, immediately there was mention of Trump’s famous reality TV series The Apprentice. In almost every episode, you see these top business people fighting for corporate glory, using a common phrase: “I’m not here to make friends! It’s not personal.”

Friendship is an area that most business leaders feel is taboo to business success. We can literally assume we are just building business partnerships in business.

Friendship is what made the Avengers tick. It’s always what makes great businesses tick too.

Sony started, thanks to the strong friendship between Akio Morita and Masaru Ibuka. Intel’s roots stem from the friendship of Andy Grove, Gordon Moore and Bob Noyce.

Even Apple’s creation stems from the friendship between Steve Jobs and Steve Woznai. Deep friendships enable lasting partnerships in business.

According to research by Gallup, personal friendships at work can increase satisfaction by as much as 50%.

Gallup’s study entitled Vital Friends: The People You Can’t Afford To Live Without highlighted that people with three friends at work were 46% more likely to be extremely satisfied with their jobs and 88% more likely to be satisfied with their lives.

In fact, Gallup’s employee engagement benchmark survey includes the question, “Do I have a best friend at work?” as one of the indicators of greater engagement in the workplace.

Having a best friend at work is linked to higher organisational productivity, profit, employee retention, motivation and customer satisfaction.

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**LIVE LONGER**

Most amazingly, friendships at work can extend your life (yes, you read that right!)

Researchers from Tel Aviv University reported that those who enjoyed good friendships at work had a significantly lower risk of dying from any cause.

People with the most supportive peer relationships at work had lower rates of mortality, and the effect held over the entire 20-year period of the study.

Another study from Flinders University found those with a strong network of peers outlived those with the least friends by 22%.

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**FRIENDSHIP RETREATS, ANYONE?**

Many companies spend a lot of money on employee engagement initiatives. How many of these initiatives include strategies to facilitate the development and sustenance of friendships among employees?

Friendship matters and is critical.

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**A-HA MOMENT**

Isn’t this the essence of employee engagement and leadership? Being accepted and encouraged and pushing each other to grow and fulfill our potential is the dream of most business leaders. So, why not create the means to enhance friendships at work?

One of the ways to start is by offering retreats where employees can bond together. At Leaderonomics, we work hard to ensure we constantly have opportunities where friendship can be deepened.

Here are my top 10 ways to increase friendship in your organisation:

1. Reach out first – take the first step to initiate friendship. Don’t wait for others to connect with you.
2. Don’t judge – friends can come in any form. Don’t let appearances or reputation influence you.
3. Schedule time for friendship at work – just set up some time to get to know people at work and nurture your friendships.
4. Ensure focused attention when you’re with friends at work – learn to listen and truly listen.
5. Learn to love people – genuine friendship begins with love and caring.
6. Learn to love yourself – when you dislike yourself, people will sense it and like-wise react to you as you do to yourself.
7. Be the friend you like to have – you get as much as you put in to your friendships.
8. Be honest with your friends – without honesty there is no friendship.
9. Stay in touch whenever possible – if you travel constantly, lack of presence could jeopardise friendships. Find ways to stay in touch.
10. Gestures of kindness – occasionally shower your friends with small gifts, notes of encouragement and small gestures of thoughtfulness.

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**FINAL THOUGHTS**

According to geneticists, each of us alive today would have more than 1.1 million relatives living in AD 1066 when the population of the world was merely 200 million.

So for any two people alive today to be related by a common ancestor a thousand years ago is roughly one in 200.

This means we are all part of the same family anyway. As such, building friendships at work may not seem an issue after all. We can literally assume we are just building friendships among lost “relatives”.

The workplace is where we spend most of our waking hours, so having strong friendship in the workplace is important.

So, let’s strive to build deep friendships with our co-workers and employees. It could mean the difference between success and failure in your business.

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A confession – I’m writing this article away from the comfort of our office. I love working remotely whenever I can. Don’t get me wrong, I do enjoy being in the office very much (ours was recently featured in Star Property as the top 10 most inspiring offices in Malaysia). But when it comes to writing, the job gets done more efficiently somewhere else. Thankfully, Leaderonomics is one of the increasing number of companies in Malaysia offering such flexibility. In fact, that is the growing trend nowadays.

According to a 2013 survey by global work-space provider Regus, 53% of Malaysian executives work flexibly for at least half of the week. Compare that with the global average of 48%, clearly we are slightly more accepting of a more flexible work arrangement. Perhaps it’s the sign of changing times, enabled by collaborative technologies.

But can chief executives fully trust employees to be responsible on telecommute? As it turns out, 63% of Malaysian respondents in the Regus survey believed that it is achievable, provided that the management team takes the lead.

A good number of efficiency monitoring report systems are available, and most Malaysian companies (61%) are using it. Video call as a communication channel is also a popular choice by our local companies at 65% of total respondents surveyed. This kind of arrangement can arguably be seen as valuable from the perspective of the younger workforce. According to the survey, 39% of them believe that remote working encourages junior employees to be more responsible.

And rather surprisingly, 46% believe that flexible working schemes promote a healthier professional relationship between employees and management. The numbers seem encouraging. Perhaps more companies and business managers are seeing the advantages of telecommuting.

WHY COMPANIES OPT FOR REMOTE TEAMS
Some common themes:
- Fast access to more and better quality talent
- Company can save money on overheads
- Commuting time saved = higher productivity

If you work in major cities, you are probably plagued by traffic congestion almost on a daily basis. One accident or a stalled vehicle is all it takes to trigger a long crawl to and from work, effectively ruining the mood for the entire day. Time saved can be better used to increase productivity.

The three common advantages for remote teams are quantitative in nature. The effect of it can be measured relatively.

But What aBout the qualitative part?
For one, any company that offers flexibility when it comes to working arrangements can immediately be seen as an attractive workplace. It is not just welcoming to the younger generation of talent, but also to those with special needs or commitments.

So not only does it enhance the brand of and loyalty to the company, telecommuting can improve the quality of lives. If that can motivate employees, there can be a positive impact on performance.

IT’S ALL ABOUT TRUST, AND TAKING THE LEAD
While remote working arrangements can be seen as a win-win situation for both employer and employee, there are some considerations that have to be taken into account. The employer may want to encourage teams to work remotely for various reasons, but not everyone is ready or suitable to go down the path. If people in a conventional office setting still struggle with trust issues, what more of those who work remotely?

A good employee may not necessarily be a good remote employee. It requires another level of organisation, motivation, and focus to be productive away from the office. Similarly, you can train someone to be good on the job, but how do you train someone to be good when working remotely?

Another consideration is that not having everyone under the same roof could be a potential risk to the culture of a company. However, some would argue that remote workers can proactively work on building deeper bonds within the team and the company, and there are some truths to that. In The Gallup Blog, it was mentioned that these employees enjoy camaraderie with co-workers. This creates a typical sense of belonging for remote workers.

More importantly, because the team is dispersed, communication that is clear, concise, concrete, correct, coherent, complete and courteous is highly critical and is often emphasised. Thus, managing remote teams requires greater emphasis on clarity of communication, solid trust, and established processes. Verbal and written communication can present varying tones and is open to possible miscommunication, hence having remote teams who excel in both is crucial.

Having a remote team can unlock great potential, but it does not come easy. Hiring the right people and meeting in person regularly have to be done to make the difference. According to Chris Ducker, author of Virtual Freedom: How to Work with Virtual Staff to Buy More Time, Become More Productive, and Build Your Dream Business, ensure that your hiring process of finding the right people includes parameters such as:

- **Skills**
  A candidate for the virtual team ought to possess good communication and collaboration skills.

- **Availability**
  A potential candidate needs to be clear about their time zone expectations. Ensure you are clear about processes and workflows involved so that you can envision how the remote candidate can help fill in the gaps in the team.

- **Self-motivated**
  A remote worker should relatively be a self-motivator to work in a remote environment.

The requisite technical skills, of course, is a must.

- **Verbal and written communication**
  Such as:
  - The objective is to provide a feedback loop so that progress can be monitored.
  - The requisite technical skills of course, is a must.
  - Where do we even begin? There is a wide range of enabling tools to choose from. From project management (Trello, Asana, Basecamp), to communication (Google Hangout, Skype), documentation (Google Docs, Evernote), and a list of others, there is not one task that cannot be done remotely and collaboratively.

Above all, the leadership will have to be comfortable and supportive of the flexibility.

Not the rigid type, but more towards creating a consistency of how we work. Provide a structure and guidance for getting things done, efficiently and effectively. The objective is to provide a feedback loop so that progress can be measured, both on people and on the organisation. A good method would be a simple weekly update to touch base with everyone.

Processes are usually uninteresting and rigid, but the point is to make it empowering so that if everything else fails, the processes lets you get the work done.

As we are getting more advanced in this connected economy, we are no longer limited by geographical location.
RAISING THE BAR OF THE HR PROFESSION IN MALAYSIA

WHICH HR CERTIFICATION PROGRAMMES SUITE YOU?

HR Certification Programmes

*Please note that the information provided is subject to change.*
VIRTUAL team. It is a common trend today seen especially in multinational and shared services companies. Yael S. Zofi, author of A Manager’s Guide to Virtual Teams, defined “virtual team” as a team whose members simultaneously work together, whether they work across the street or across the world, to achieve a common purpose while physically apart.

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The rapid advancement of ICT (information and communications technology) in the last couple of years has greatly enabled us to connect and work with people across time and space.

**VIRTUAL connection VS VIRTUAL connection**

For an on-site team, casual conversations in the pantry or around the water cooler bring a general sense of intimacy and connectedness with our teammates. After all, that is how humans are innately wired. As social beings, we share stories, shake hands, high-five, eat together, carpool and give each other a pat on the back for accomplished tasks.

The close proximity of face-to-face interaction heightens our awareness of our teammates’ verbal tone, body language and visual cues. Thus, in a shared office environment, we have better knowledge of our teammates’ personalities, career goals and working styles. In contrast, a virtual environment diminishes such cues. Even though we are electronically wired 24/7, we are somewhat ‘humanly’ disconnected.

We can even feel like we are working in isolation because of the lack of personal interaction and social connection after work hours.

Besides that, it is a challenge to gauge our virtual teammates on a personal level and bond with them when we mostly interact for work purposes via emails, instant messaging, teleconferences and videoconferences. Does that mean that we forgo this whole idea of virtual teams?

**ENGAGING THE “HUMAN” IN VIRTUAL SPACE**

Well, according to Virtual Teams Trend Report, released by AIM Strategies in 2010, 70% of respondents said virtual teams will increase in prevalence, and will be considered the norm in conducting business. Also, due to globalisation and increased cost effectiveness, the trend of virtual teams looks set to increase rather than stabilise or disappear.

So, since virtual teams are here to stay, let us then build the human connection in virtual space by replicating the on-site environment as much as possible.

One of the ways is to create what Zofi termed as a virtual water cooler, referring to sessions where teammates chat at the pantry, celebrate birthdays and catch up with one another.

In restoring the human touch in virtual environments, consider these pointers:

**KNOWING ME, KNOWING YOU**

As how an onboarding session is sometimes done for newbies on-site teams, we can kick off a videoconference call with a “welcome” party. During the call, give time for everyone to get to know each other before discussing team directions, expectations and goals.

Set up a team website which gives your team an identity and a sense of belonging in the virtual workspace. The website ought to include all team members’ photos to help put “faces” to names when working together.

At the very least, we would not make the mistake of addressing someone in the wrong gender, which happens often when we mostly communicate via emails and instant messaging. It also happens when there is no proper introduction of team members, virtually.

Basic personal information such as hobbies and aspirations is also encouraged on the team website to give us topics of conversation during casual catch-ups.

**RAPPORT AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING**

It is good practice for virtual team leaders to meet face-to-face with their team at least once a year to build rapport with their team members.

Being physically present just for a few good days subconsciously adds to the meaning and purpose of our human interaction among members in a virtual team.

After all, when it comes to building rapport and fostering trust, meeting someone face-to-face is still very much a foundational part of the process, especially during the initial stages of virtual team setups.

Also, advocate perspective sharing and brainstorming sessions.

During virtual team meetings, always encourage everyone to share their thoughts honestly on a particular issue or challenge faced at work. These sessions will help us gauge each other’s values and working styles so we can achieve greater understanding of dynamics in the team.

**CONTINUOUS SOCIAL INTERACTIONS**

Utilise the team’s internal shared network to constantly share vital project updates and information to ensure that teammates are on the same page.

With team websites, announcements can also be made accessible on a virtual bulletin board.

For example, a teammate in Australia who is participating in a marathon to raise funds for a cancer awareness campaign can post such an announcement to gain moral and monetary support for a good cause from teammates based in Malaysia.

Aside from completing tasks at work, take the initiative and allocate some time to get other virtual members to share something about themselves.

A great way to keep interactions alive is to mark down their countries’ public holidays and teammates’ birthdays, and wish them accordingly.

If your teammates are of different nationalities, learn to speak in their language when communicating non-work conversations.

**INJECTING FUN AND LAUGHTER**

Create a unique virtual team culture to foster good working relationships beyond work. With the convenience of online games such as Fantasy Football, it helps to get people from across the divide to play together (not when you’re working of course) for a good time of friendly competitions.

Consider creating a forum for team members to create their own groups around common interests such as sports, music, movies, photography, humour, etc.

With such avenues to get like-minded people together, information and tips can be shared freely.

**EMBRACE THE FUTURE**

Even though there is no physical (i.e. human touch) team building activity that can be done in virtual teams, we leverage on technology and online tools to form bonds based on deeper shared values of the team (i.e. human connection).

Since communication is not done in person, virtual teams learn to communicate more deliberately and intentionally.

Most of the time, we communicate with more clarity because we tend to word our thoughts before sending out an email or instant message. Besides that, we also tend to prepare ourselves way ahead based on a meeting agenda before a teleconference or videoconference session.

In conclusion, we may lose a bit of human connection in them. A virtual team is like any community in that its culture is a product of common norms and ongoing interactions that lead to shared experiences.” — Yael S. Zofi
TAKING THE VIRTUAL LEAD

6 IDEAS TO BUILD A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

1. **CORPORATE CARE PACKAGES**
   Many companies have promotional or corporate gifts such as stationery, mugs and corporate calendars to show their appreciation and care towards their virtual team members when such documents or product samples are distributed. A simple gesture such as this shows your thoughtfulness and care towards them.

2. **TEAM PROFILE SHARING**
   Use shared team profiles as an avenue to get to know each other. On a serious note, basic information should include ways to reach them and their communication preferences with the team. On a lighter side, include trivia about themselves such as their pet's name, hobbies, favourite music, quirks, etc.

3. **VIRTUAL OFFICE TOUR**
   Most laptops today come with webcam and wireless internet access functionality. So, why not use it to showcase your office to your virtual members? Have them do the same. Be creative and utilise it to share some crazy things that happen around the office, especially during special occasions such as birthdays and holiday parties.

4. **VIRTUAL NETWORKING**
   Allocate a short amount of time in a day (or twice) to talk to your team members about non-work related matters. Take note of little things that matter to them such as important events in their personal and family life. Acknowledge birthdays and be on the lookout for news or books that might interest them. Essentially, invest your time in people helps build rapport and relationships beyond just work.

5. **VIRTUAL CONTESTS**
   Initiate random contests to get your team members excited to participate. Contests can range from trivial questions about the company to more lively ones such as most Christmasy cubicle. In the latter, use videoconferencing so everyone can see all of their decoration and rally for votes.

6. **SHARED STORAGE**
   Creating one virtual community or shared drive where all of your team's documents are kept and updated makes everyone feel included, no matter where they are working. The shared drive should store team-related documents such as team member profiles, team blueprints, goals, process documentation and stretch project plans.

By IMRAN HASHMI
imran.hashim@leaderonomics.com

TODAY’s competitive landscape has propelled many organisations to embrace change. Gone are the days when a dominant player can comfortably sit on his/her laurels without a concern of change in the environment. And this is happening in all industries and not just technology-based industries.

Realising that change is pivotal for growth and success, Johor Port Bhd (JPB) has undertaken various initiatives to develop and grow their talent. Enabling your most important resource, your employees and talent, to understand the need for change, growth and to be developed to their full potential is key for pivoting through this new era of change.

LEADERSHIP ACCELERATION PROGRAMME (LAP)

As such, JPB embarked on a Leadership Acceleration Programme (LAP) in 2013 to enable their talent to remain world-class and be adaptable to change in this new competitive environment. On June 19, 2014, 20 high-potential talents from JPB graduated from LAP. The graduation ceremony was attended by all the key leaders at JPB including its CEO Shahrull Allam Shahul Hamid.

Shahrull further reinforced JPB’s commitment to grow its employees to great heights. “Our vision to have a competent and vibrant workforce to embrace the challenges of the 21st century is complemented by many different elements and one of it is by exposing our leaders to the latest in management skills and perspectives. LAP is an accelerated, rigorous long-term programme which forces JPB’s top senior talent through intense, painful learning applications.

Participants also go through live business projects which requires them to drive change and growth in various parts of the port. The projects were set up as an exposure experience for the participants to understand the challenges of the company and not just their own departments. According to Shahrull, “That is a key learning that has to take place if you are to take on a bigger leadership position within the company.”

Through these projects, participants worked together on strategic and operational projects, gaining a deeper understanding of the constant challenges and realities the company faces.

In some projects further instilled a sense of ownership of the company and enabled the participants to learn business acumen. Shahrull, in his speech, further added that he was looking to this special group of leaders who had gone through the programme to inspire the rest of the organisation and take the organisation forward.

As part of the keynote address, Roshan Thiran, CEO of Leaderonomics encouraged the graduates to understand that graduation was not the end of the journey but rather the beginning of the journey of change and growth. Learning is a never-ending process and does not end at any given point in life, he graduating from university or even from an accelerator programme like LAP.

He also stressed that Shahrull and the leadership team have higher expectations of the graduates. If the graduates were taking a few days to complete a task, expectations going forward would be that they would do it faster, quicker, cheaper and in a more impactful way.

The graduates clearly understood the need for them to continually reinvent themselves and ensure that they do not stop their growth and learning.

WHAT GRADUATES SAY ABOUT LAP

One of the recipients of JPB LAP Leadership Award, Rahimah Rahmat, expressed her gratitude for the opportunity given and noted that the programme experience has enhanced her practical appreciation for the demands that comes with top leadership.

“The most memorable experience during the programme is people management. The programme really pushes you to balance your responsibilities, be it personal, family and work. “Working across departments and with people of various backgrounds, you have to take in a lot of factors to ensure the business project runs smoothly. At the end of the day, leadership is focused on people.”

Another JPB LAP Leadership Award recipient, Yohannes Nazwir, pointed out that the experience is similar to ‘attending MBA at the workplace’ given the level of learning and application involved in the programme.

His Fellow LAP graduate and Leadership Award recipient Azzman Mohamed echoed the same sentiment, “I’ve experienced the MBA, and this programme comes close to it.”

SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

While the recent LAP graduates can breathe a sigh of relief at the conclusion of the programme, JPB’s transformation is far from over. Understanding that talent development is key to ensuring a sustainable transformation, the focus for JPB is on the next group of leaders to be accelerated for growth.

JPB thus kicked off their Management Development Programme (MDP) for another set of high-potential leaders to undergo similar leadership development experiences to enable them to be change agents of JPB.

Imran Hashmi is excited to see Johor Port Bhd taking the lead in helping their employees grow into great leaders. He looks forward to seeing these “empowered” leaders taking JPB to the next level of growth and success. For more information on talent acceleration programmes, email editor@leaderonomics.com
VIRTUAL WORKPLACE TODAY

By MILLIE ONG
millie.ong@leaderonomics.com

ith increasing incorporation of technology in today’s workplace, virtual teams are becoming more common. In a literature review of studies on the virtual team, Powell, Piccoli and Ives defined virtual teams as “groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks.”

With increasing demand for flexible work arrangements, many employees find themselves forming virtual teams – teams not situated within the same location, but working primarily using information technology.

These teams may be temporary or permanent, but are merged together with a common task to complete. Using email, instant messaging and video-calls, individuals can collaborate, share knowledge and work seamlessly.

Virtual teams may benefit or be detrimental to an organization’s productivity. For the modern working woman, virtual teams may serve a larger purpose altogether.

Research by Agnetha Broo, has shown gender differences in learning and communication using technology, with women having a more negative attitude towards computers and the internet as compared to men.

Thus, the question arises – are virtual work arrangements a boon or bane for the 21st century career woman?

BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

The virtual team has the potential to ease the working woman’s efforts to build professional careers while caring for their families as it enables them to do both simultaneously. Without being tied to the office, women working from home have more flexible hours beyond the traditional nine-to-five working hours.

Virtual teams allow women to be more hands-on with raising their kids while working. Reducing commute time and distractions from the office means more time for women to engage in healthy practices and leisure activities – resulting in happier and healthier employees.

In fact, this could partially explain the findings of a study which found that women were more satisfied with working in virtual teams compared to men.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

A widely espoused advantage of virtual teams is the ‘boundary-less’ working environment, whereby geography, space and organizational limitations are diminished. This opens many doors for women to engage in opportunities that may not be present in their local.

Although gender equality has come far in the last few decades, certain countries still have gender discrimination in the workplace.

The glass ceiling is only too true for women living in these countries, limiting their opportunities. However, through virtual teams, women can be released from the working environment of their home countries, which may be ripe with discriminatory policies.

Instead, they can contribute their talents and expertise to projects of organisations that may not operate in their locale.

MERITOCRATIC METRICS

Due to the unique functions of a virtual team, work performance is measured in metrics that go beyond the traditional hourly-based methods.

It is the work output in the form of deliverables that is the key index. The production of reports, products and execution of action plans become the KPIs (key performance indicators), leading to a highly meritocratic system.

There is little room for non-task related measurements, which allow for a more level playing field for women.

A person’s performance is then less likely to be judged by gender biases, such as viewing men as being more suitable for certain positions.

Virtual teams allow women to be part of a workforce that rewards talent and performance regardless of gender.

Although virtual teams seem to be the perfect fit for women, there remain some challenges that are unique to women as well.

LIMITED COMMUNICATION

Research by Karima Merchant indicate that women are more relationship-focused than men (who are more task-focused). Given this, some women may find the lack of face-to-face communication a major challenge when working in virtual teams.

The absence of contextual and non-verbal communication may even cause misunderstanding and confusion when sharing information.

Surveys on women who are part of virtual teams show that they often feel that insufficient communication led to unresolved conflicts in teams.

Some women may find this a hindrance to their work performance. Nonetheless, with carefully managed processes, communication can be improved within virtual teams.

LESS CHANCE FOR RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Along with the limited communication of virtual teams, is the barrier towards relationship-building amongst team members. When everyone is in the same location, it is much easier for rapport to be formed, and there are more opportunities for increasing team cohesiveness.

Instead, in a virtual team, the manager is often only held together by the mutual goal of the task. For many women, the process of working towards a task can be just as important as completing the task itself.

Thus, the lack of relationships when working on a task over information technology may dampen the motivation and enthusiasm of women.

However, if a strong focus is placed on facilitating social interaction – particularly at the start – robust relationships can also be developed within a virtual team.

MANAGING A VIRTUAL WORK LIFESTYLE

Despite the appeal of a virtual team – flexible work arrangements and the coveted work-life balance – some individuals may find it difficult to adjust to this alternative lifestyle.

Women who juggle caring for their families while maintaining a full-time career may find it difficult to manage their schedule.

The flexibility of virtual teams may mean working late into the night, or at odd hours to compensate for any time taken off during the routine work day.

Regardless whether virtual teams are more beneficial or detrimental to women, its presence in the working world cannot be ignored.

Virtual teams may be the best option for some, though less suitable for others. With training and proper management, its challenges can be overcome.

The question is, are leaders willing to make it work?

Millie Ong is willing to advocate for virtual work teams if it allows her to work from home in her pyjamas. You can contact her at millie.ong@leaderonomics.com.
By SABRINA KAMARUDDIN

The good news is, the big fish are hearing us; many of the more “traditional” multinationals as well as younger companies are adapting their workplace and work styles to attract and retain young employees, including heavy-weights like Cisco, EF and Google. In fact, Leaderonomics is no exception to the trend. We were recently featured as one of the top 10 most inspiring offices in Malaysia in an article published in Star Property.

A notable and highly popular criteria in choosing an employer is the culture of the workplace, especially in having flexible work hours.

Ciscos, having acknowledged this, claims that there’s a “desire for more flexibility on where, when, and how work gets done, with continuous movement from work to personal activities and back again throughout their working hours”.

WORKING FROM HOME FOR YOUNGER FOLKS

We are so bent on it that Millennials Branding research says 45% of Millennials would rather have workplace flexibility over better pay.

In fact, just remove the office entirely out of the equation; more of us would simply like to work from home.

Working from home, telecommuting, remote working – call it what you like – the concept is not new nor novel: Deloitte has 86% working out-of-office at least 20% of the time, and 82% of Intel employees regularly work remotely.

Among the older folks, working from home is a desirable thing, often among parents with young children or professionals and senior managers who are probably motivated to perform anyway, no matter where they are.

It has its many advantages – apart from the increasingly absurd Kuala Lumpur rush-hour traffic – and contrary to initial impressions, it can actually raise productivity.

Nicholas Bloom, Professor of Economics at Stanford University, has found that higher productivity is attributed to the fact that people at home worked longer. “They started earlier, took shorter breaks, and worked until the end of the day”.

FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE — WHAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER BEFORE COMMITTING

With today’s advancement in communication, it seems so much easier – not to mention exciting – to work outside an office, especially since we have the liberty to choose where we would like to set up camp, what we wear and how loud we blast the music. But is it really as fun and easy as it seems?

There are an increasing number of young companies and individuals in Malaysia who dare down the path of getting productive discussions and feedback.

Here are some important things you should consider before jumping to it:

1. DISCIPLINE IS NOT A JOKE

“The key to making it work is discipline with time management and goals,” says Nasri Lian, who has been working as a freelance videographer since graduating six years ago.

Without great discipline and clear targets to achieve, it is easy to get distracted working at home.

“They thought of completing a chore, fixing something, turning on the TV or even paying a house bill only slows down the productivity rate,” he says.

“It becomes rather difficult when there are more people living in the same house because chances of interference may rise.”

Nasri debunked the oft-said presumption that those who work at home have more free time. “The myth about working from home is being able to work less, which is the ideal goal. However, it takes time to reach such a point,” he says.

“Some people get in expecting it too soon, and call it quits earlier than they should.”

2. FIX CULTURE AND GROUND RULES

Wago Communications, a company which decided to give up its brick and mortar for remote working earlier this year, makes it a policy for the team to meet twice a week for a catch-up meeting. They also have a bit of fun with that – there’s a ground rule against visiting the same cafe twice.

“When we do meet, it’s very productive and impactful,” says Zain HD, founder of Wago. “Everyone is more aware of what they and their colleagues are up to.”

Lim Feixiang, a Wago employee, expresses the need for clear habits and guidelines to remain productive.

“We fixed a policy where you need to reply emails within a two-hour time frame,” says Lim. “Besides that, work habits hardly changed as we’re still as busy and get things done on time.”

3. RELATIONSHIPS

While working at home means you have the freedom to decide between work and social time, you miss out on a lot of essential human connection that is easily available in the office environment.

Especially in creative and trouble-shooting situations, less face-to-face translates to a loss in terms of generating productive discussions and feedback.

“After all, we’re human,” says Nasri. “Conversations with our peers stimulate emotions which may lead to creative thinking needed for work.”

Bonding is also important for mentorship and being able to leverage on your colleagues’ knowledge and experiences.

Lim adds, “Relationships within the team are important to build your career, and has the ability to open doors for you.”

OUT-OF-OFFICE: IS IT FOR YOU?

Although it allows flexibility, working from home does not mean you simply break out of the usual office hours.

“I would suggest taking nine-to-five as a rule of thumb to get things done and no more work after that,” says Nasri.

“It might not be for everyone,” he adds. “Some people work better under leaders where great things happen in both work and personal life.”

In fact, Bloom’s research finds that some may actually prefer the office space. “The younger workers whose social lives are more connected to the office tend to not want to work from home as much.”

“We know we can get high performance, but what about the soft stuff? We still get remarks by staff that they miss the office, and the togetherness that comes with it,” says Zain. “A part of me reckons that although it is working, it is not solved yet.”

Sabrina Kamaruddin has spent the past year helping undergraduates realise their leadership potential, as part of the team at Leaderonomics Campus team. You can email her at editor@leaderonomics.com
WHAT HOPE IS

By CHEAH HWEI YAN
editor@leaderonomics.com

HOPE. What is hope? Some people would say that it is equivalent to faith, while others say it leads us to success. Well, I say that hope is both of that.

Many people wake up hoping the best for each day, giving faith to themselves. But there are those who wake up feeling hopeless and lost. These are the people who have tried many times and failed. After many times of trying, their hope vanishes and turns into self-pity and self-doubt.

These people are often criticised and laughed at by those who have reached the top and have experienced fewer failures. There are people who are very talented and hardworking, but they lack hope and kindness towards others.

On the other hand, there are people who are very kind and hopeful, but lack talents and hard work. We don’t need to choose between being one or the other, we can actually be both. So when you see an opportunity, grab it, hold on to it, and never let it go. Pain and suffering will come your way but those are just minor challenges in your life. Learn to overcome them and success will be your friend.

Pain and suffering will come your way but those are just minor challenges in your life. Learn to overcome them and success will be your friend.

So instead of laughing and criticising the hopeless and the lost, why not try helping them? We can start by using this method. Picture yourself in the shoes of someone who has lost hope. Feel the anger and sadness they feel.

Think of how painful they feel when someone criticises and laughs at them. Only then would you think of what you can do to help them.

There are many things to hope for in this world. But hope alone can’t bring you far. We need to work hard for the things we hope for. We have learnt about hope since young, because every child watches Disney, and Disney cartoons are all about hope.

Cinderella hopes to find her prince. Pocahontas hopes for peace. Like the quote from the movie The Princess and the Frog, “That old star can only take you part of the way. You got to help him with some hard work of your own.”

I searched the dictionary for the definition of hope, and here is what I got: Hope is “to want something to happen and think that it is possible.”

I hope you remember that from now onwards, one small word such as hope can bring us wonderful things. So spread it to everyone, and be hopeful.

INSPIRATIONAL QUOTES FROM OUR READERS

“Positivity brings all possibilities and greatness to life.”
- Joyce Atolagbe Siaw

“To achieve the greatest things in your life, you have to experience failures beforehand.”
- Oo Cheng Keat