

The Virtual Work Skills You Need — Even If You Never Work Remotely

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Maintaining strong, productive relationships with clients and co-workers can be challenging when you never see the person you're working with. Yet, it is common to have ongoing work relationships – sometimes lasting years — with people you've never met in person.

We often think of “virtual work” as working with someone located outside an office, or in another city or country. This type of work is on the rise: a [2017 Gallup report](#) found 43% of American employees work remotely; in [another survey](#), 48% of respondents reported that a majority of their virtual teamwork involved members from other cultures.

However, virtual work also encompasses how we are turning to technology to conduct business with *nearby* colleagues, sometimes within the same building or campus. At a large consumer-products firm where we've been conducting research, an HR director recounted the changes she witnessed in employees located in two buildings a few miles apart. “Ten years ago, we would regularly drive between buildings to meet each other, but today, we almost never do; meetings are conducted by

videoconference and everything else is handled on e-mail and IM.”

In our interview and survey research, we find that people tend to significantly underestimate the proportion of their work that is virtual, largely because they believe virtual work occurs outside the office. But it’s important for us to recognize the true extent of virtual work, because successful virtual work demands a different set of social and interpersonal skills and behaviors than face-to-face work.

Research consistently indicates that virtual work skills – such as the ability to proactively manage media-based interactions, to establish communication norms, to build social rapport with colleagues, and to demonstrate cooperation – [enhance trust within teams](#) and [increase performance](#). Our surveys indicate that only about 30% of companies train employees in virtual work skills, but when they do, the training is more likely to focus on software skills and company policies than on social and interpersonal skills. Our findings are similar to those of a [2006 survey of HR leaders](#) on training of virtual teams, suggesting that while technology and virtual work itself has advanced dramatically in recent years, our preparation to work virtually has not.

[Our recent review](#) of 30 years of virtual work research shows that the most effective workers engage in a set of strategies and behaviors that we call “virtual intelligence.” Some people tend to be naturally more adept at working virtually than others; yet, everyone can increase their

virtual intelligence. Two specific skill sets contributing to virtual intelligence are 1) establishing “rules of engagement” for virtual interactions, and 2) building and maintaining trust. These skill sets are relevant to all individuals who conduct virtual work, including coworkers in the same office who interact virtually.

Establishing “rules of engagement”

When working with someone face-to-face, the “rules of engagement” for your work together most likely evolve naturally, as you learn the best times of day to connect, where to hold productive meetings, and the most effective meeting format. In virtual work, however, these “rules of engagement” typically require a dedicated conversation. At a minimum, virtual colleagues should discuss the following rules around:

- *Communication technology.* Once you know you’ll be working virtually with someone on a regular basis, initiate a short conversation about their available technology, and agree on the best means of communication (e.g., “We’ll e-mail for simple, non-urgent matters, but get on Skype when there is something complex that might require us to share screens. Texting is fine if we need to get in touch urgently, but shouldn’t be used day-to-day.”)
- *Best times to connect.* You might ask your virtual co-worker, “What times of day are typically better to call or text? Are there particular days of the week (or month) that I should avoid?” Establishing this rule

early in a virtual work relationship both establishes respect for each other's time, and saves time, by avoiding fruitless contact attempts.

- *How best to share information.* If you're collaborating on documents or other electronic files, establish a process to ensure you don't inadvertently delete updates or create conflicting versions. File-sharing services such as Dropbox can help monitor revisions to jointly-owned documents (often called "version control"), but it is still wise to establish a simple protocol to avoid lost or duplicated work.

Building and maintaining trust

Two types of trust matter in virtual work: relational trust (trust that your colleague is looking out for your best interests), and competence-based trust (trust that your colleague is both capable and reliable).

To build relational trust:

- Bring a social element into the virtual work relationship. Some people do this by starting conversations with non-work-related questions, such as "How are things going where you are?" or "How was your weekend?" Avoid making questions too personal, and don't overwhelm your colleague with extensive details of your life. Keep it simple and sincere, and the conversation will develop naturally over time.

- Let your enthusiasm and personality show in your virtual communications. Keep it professional, but try adding a little of your own 'voice' to give your virtual colleague a sense of who you are, just as they would have in a face-to-face meeting.

To build competence-based trust:

- Share your relevant background and experiences, indicating how these will help you support the current project. For example, on a new-product development project, you might say, "I'm really looking forward to contributing to the market analysis, as it focuses on a market that I researched last year on another project."
- Take initiative in completing tasks whenever possible and communicate that you're doing so with periodic update e-mails. Doing this shows commitment to the shared task.
- Respond to e-mail quickly and appropriately. We risk obviousness in making this point, but many virtual work relationships fail due to inconsistent e-mail communication. Silence works quickly to destroy trust in a virtual colleague. We recommend replying to non-urgent e-mails within one business day (sooner if it's urgent). If you need more time, send a quick acknowledgement of the e-mail, letting your colleague know when you will reply.

As the use of technology for all types of communication has become ubiquitous, the

need for virtual work skills is no longer limited to telecommuters and global teams; it now extends to those of us whose work never takes us out of the office. Making a concerted effort to develop these skills by setting up rules of engagement and establishing trust early can feel uncomfortable, especially for people new to the idea of virtual work. Most of us are used to letting these dynamics evolve naturally in face-to-face relationships, with little or no discussion. Yet, workers with higher virtual intelligence know that these skills are unlikely to develop without explicit attention, and that making a short-term investment in developing the virtual relationship will yield long-term benefits.

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