

## Who Knows What on a Virtual Team

### *Creating a Transactive Memory System*

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Here is the scenario: Bill in London needs information. Ivan in Moscow is the expert. Bill goes down the hall to Thomas for an answer, even though his information is less complete. Bill does not contact Ivan at all. Sound familiar? Yes, and [research](#) proves it.



Why doesn't Bill go to the person who he knows is the expert? It's psychological, as the tools exist to make the communication clear and easy. Bill may not know Ivan well, and therefore is uncertain as to 1. the reaction of Ivan to the request, 2. the willingness of Ivan to share the right information and 3. the availability and mood of Ivan as he does not have a cue. Too many uncertainties, which he does not have with

Thomas, so down the hall he goes.

On the other hand, Ivan also faces uncertainties if Bill makes a request. 1. He will have to apply his expertise to the context of Bill's situation, and may feel uncomfortable and challenged by Bill's questions and 2. Bill may not use the information as Ivan had intended, thereby perhaps embarrassing Ivan.

Better for each of them that Bill spoke with Thomas. But not better for the team results.

Most leaders of knowledge based virtual teams dream of their team members sharing valuable and helpful information with each other. It just makes sense – all these smart, experienced people could help each other to be more effective with better solutions. Research supports this – information diversity on a team positively impacts a team's ability to work in the VUCA world. But not if team members do not contact each other.

A concept to consider and create is Transactive Memory System, the ability of team members to recognize experts on the team, support the experts' development of their expertise, and to use the expertise when necessary. On a new virtual team, this system is hindered by distance and technology, and needs to be developed. Let's breakdown the components of creating a TMS.

*Knowledge Diversity – Who knows what.* Team members require mechanisms to determine what their colleagues know, and the quality of their knowledge. Introductions and resumes aside, until Bill starts working with Ivan, he only has a rough idea what Ivan knows.

*A psychologically safe team environment.* Requesting and sharing knowledge can be risky business. The requestor wants some assurance the expert will be willing and able to share, and

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the expert wants some idea of how the requestor will use the knowledge. After all, reputations are at stake.

*Mechanisms to update and apply knowledge.* Knowledge should not be static, and needs to be developed and applied. Team members who help each other with that process create a stronger memory system.

How to build a team transactive memory system on a virtual team?

- **Interdependence** Organize the work so team members are working together. This fosters trust and knowledge of each other. This may seem counterintuitive as virtuality encourages independent working, but people need connection to build trust and awareness of the other's strengths and ways of working.
- **Shared Team Identity** Team identity can be a powerful motivator within virtual teams. The idea of 'being in this together', spurs a collaborative, knowledge sharing team culture.
- **Shared Goals** All teams need clarity of shared goals, but virtual teams more than others because of all the things competing for attention. Strong shared goals remind the team members of the importance of including their colleagues to reach the goals together.
- **Rewards for supporting TMS** This can be clever and fun such as simple acknowledgement when team members reach across borders and connect. Or the more complex structure of using a point system which are allocated by team members and may lead to some reward like a gift certificate.
- **Social Networking Tool** Tools can facilitate the 'question and answer' aspect of TMS. For instance, using private team [Slack](#) account provides the space for Bill to reach out to the team, or to Ivan in particular. Ideally, Ivan knows the other team members and with psychological safety and shared identity in the team, is willing to provide his expertise.

Surveys often list 'access to global talent' as the benefit of virtual teams, but connecting the talent does not come easily. Teams which intentionally create a connected team can leverage the expertise for high performance.

***Want more information about global virtual teams that succeed? Contact Theresa Sigillito Hollema, [info@interact-global.net](mailto:info@interact-global.net)***