Communication, Relationships and Practices in Virtual Work – Shawn Long

Abstract

Virtual work is rapidly becoming an essential element in contemporary organizations. The traditional brick and mortar organizational structure is rapidly shifting to one that is dislocated, virtual and geographically dispersed. While the traditional structural work paradigm is characterized by face-to-face work with robust physically-present task and social interactions; this structure is rapidly surrendering to a more disjointed, rarely physically present, internet-based connected structure. This new work paradigm relies less upon physicality, but with a greater reliance on connectivity. Connectivity, both technological and interpersonal, is imperative to virtual work.

The increasing costs associated with working today are forcing organizations to rethink how work is accomplished across all industries and sectors. Due to the significant cost savings associated with virtual work (e.g. real estate, travel, supplies, space, capital expenses, etc.), organizations are embracing this new remotely-connected work structure. Organizations are recasting their thoughts about work design, employees, organizational place, space, and its members. Although the traditional ways of working with tethered employees to a physical campus or building, is still the most common organizational structure. These hierarchical physical structures are being replaced by a leaner, swifter, organic, time-sensitive, globally-focused, team-based, electronic aesthetic. This shifting organizational paradigm centers on the expanding and dominant use of information technologies as the key structural bedrock for virtual organizational functioning.

The virtual work paradigm has been spurred by local, national and global economics, societal changes with the use of technology, employees’ attitudes of increased individual agency, employee pressure for greater work autonomy, deliberate focus on work-life balance, and reliance for “on-demand” services rather than the standard business operating hours. Intertwine these factors with rapid globalization, outsourcing, right-sizing, off shoring, cross-cultural and (inter)national collaborations and the ability to connect remote individuals and teams, it leaves no doubt as to why the world of virtual work is fertile ground for applied and academic study.

Organizations are increasing their integration of communication technologies to facilitate the growing appetite by consumers, employees, stockholders and various constituents groups to work smarter, faster, more efficiently and with greater levels of information access. This hunger, contrasted with decreasing resources and calls for greater levels of accountability, creates an inherent conflict between various organizational stakeholders. Although the virtual work paradigm is an intriguing structural mandate that creates significant opportunities and new work arrangements. Virtual work also poses significant dilemmas and organizational issues, for organizations and employees working in this electronic terrain.

This book provides entrée into the exploration of the opportunities, benefits and costs associated with virtual work. The sixteen chapters that follow address several communicative, relational and practical issues associated with virtual work. The chapters reflect a broad range of conceptual, theoretical, empirical, methodological and pragmatic points of view. In developing this book,
my hope was to facilitate spirited interdisciplinary and international conversations across industries and institutions among academic, management and professionals about the act, process and implications of virtual work. By drawing attention to the communicative, relational and pragmatic concerns operating in the world of virtual work, this book offers a different opportunity for academics and organizational leaders to engage in the ongoing conversations about the changing nature of work driven by technology and the future of organizations as we tumble through the information-age.