

## Building trust in with virtual employees

Millions of people work virtually and remotely, both full and part time, subcontracting and freelancing from around the world, often for organisations in completely different countries. The output of ‘virtual workers’ is worth many billions of pounds a year to the global economy.

So, what of the culture of a company that relies on virtual workers? Does it impact the virtual worker? Do virtual workers require similar social incentives to those working in a dedicated office for the team?

An interesting study from India (which has a huge and increasing population of virtual workers, shows that one of the biggest problems both employers and virtual employees face is that of trust.



Further that the culture of the organisation can impact the trust relationship between the organisation and the virtual worker. In particular, organisational climate factors like its performance standards, conflict resolution structures and habits, reward systems and identity problems are found to be positively correlated with trust in an organisation. These issues and how they are handled can greatly impact the trust associated with workers. This is exacerbated with virtual workers who are often not part of the internal day-to-day culture and therefore miss the behavioural cues that build trust.

### Organisational climate

Ultimately to work for an organisation over a period of time, the individual must have some sort of personal affinity for it. The researchers state that, “from the psychological perspective (the issue is) whether ... people perceive their organisational climate as positive and whether they can form the kind of trusting relationships with others in the office setting while formal and informal meetings (including gossiping) are going on virtually and remotely.”

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## How to improve a climate of trust with virtual workers

The researchers point out that, “interpersonal trust, communication between staff, information systems, rewards and organisation structure play an important role in defining the relationships between staff that affect things like knowledge sharing.”

The researchers found that the following practices can increase inter-worker and worker/organisational trust:

1. Encourage virtual face-to-face interviews and plan orientation and induction programmes that take place over a period of time.
2. Organise frequent face-to-face meetings. Option to work in offices and having temporary cabins and office spaces can give the required touch with co-workers at times, like in IBM and other organisations.
3. Combine work arrangement like job sharing with virtual work to develop sense of responsibility and trust.
4. Where possible organise informal meetings like social events, celebrating birthdays, anniversaries together by which team members can maintain strong social bonds. Team building activities can also build social bonds.
5. Prepare and facilitate recreational activities to develop a sense of affiliation. One of them could be international holidays for virtual workers, local club memberships etc.



Not all of these will be possible where the outsourced workers are in India working for a UK company for example. However, the social side is an important factor to foster relationships and improve output and can often be achieved online through games, problem solving meetings etc.

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## Reference

Birdie, A.K. & Jain, M. (2016) Perceived Organizational Climate & Interpersonal Trust among Virtual Workers. The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 51, No. 4.

## Overview

Trust is important in all human relationships. It is harder to foster in virtual relationships especially where the virtual worker is not part of the organisational culture, which will define 'trust indicators and signifiers'.

To improve trust with virtual workers:

1. Encourage video conferencing as the facial cues are important in establishing trust.
2. Have induction programmes spread out over a longer time for virtual workers.
3. If possible, create opportunities for real face-to-face contact with representatives of the organisation.
4. Try job sharing between virtual and attended employees.
5. Organise (virtual and live) social events the virtual employees can attend.
6. Organise recreational events to develop a sense of affiliation.