# Chapter 1
# Theorizing Virtual Teams:
## Relationality in Dispersed Collaboration

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## ABSTRACT

*Contemporary organizations operate in highly connected structures, with work extending beyond physical borders. As such, organisations experience the emergence of virtual teams: teams that collaborate virtually and work together, despite differences in time-zones, physical proximity or cultural backgrounds. This chapter aims to shed light on this contemporary work arrangement from a relational perspective, leading to an understanding of the dimensions of virtuality underpinning work. For doing so, the chapter begins by describing the emergence of dispersed teams as a contemporary business practice. The discussion, then, turns to ways of relating to one another on a virtual landscape, and focuses on the virtuality dimensions of time-space, leadership, trust, and the struggle between cohesion and flexibility. The chapter concludes with a projection on the future around dispersed collaboration, and with an outline of future research for advancing the understanding and practice of virtual teams.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is much interest today in transformations at the interface between technology and the workplace (Griffith, 2012; Orlikowski, 2000; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Shapira, Lewin, Schoonhoven, Argote, & Levinthal, 2014), and this chapter outlines a theoretical agenda for one such transformation; that of virtual teams. The term 'virtual teams' has been widely taken up to indicate work teams that collaborate online across boundaries, whether organisational, functional, geographical, temporal, national or cultural (Al-Ani, Horspool, & Bligh, 2011; Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015; Kelley, 2001; Wilson, Crisp, & Mortensen, 2013). To be fair, this wide uptake reflects the significant changes in infrastructure that have occurred across many organisations; but it also reflects the aspiration that the virtual makes possible new ways of conducting and knowing work life. While positioning the understanding of virtual teams in terms of their structural characteristics undoubtedly helps in familiarising with their context, it may not be equally helpful in other respects. To frame virtual teams with their physical

implications for work arrangements allows a narrow appreciation of the relation of technology and the workplace; one that does not convey how relationality itself is undergoing transformation in dispersed collaboration (Puranam, Alexy, & Reitzig, 2014; Wilson et al., 2013).

As has been pointed out over years of research (Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015; Dewett & Jones, 2001; Griffith, 2012), technological integration in the workplace does not only facilitate dispersed collaboration, or renders it commonplace, it also makes virtual teams amenable to new virtual practices. However, only acknowledging the networking possibilities of virtual teams or the mobile workplaces they make available does not enable to investigate the wider contexts used by virtual teams. As put forward by Beyes and Steyaert (2012), there is a need to instil a relational perspective to advance the understanding of organisational phenomena beyond physical distance. Following on from here, this chapter goes on to discuss virtuality from a relational perspective (Gergen, 2009), arguing that the technology, for which the rise of the virtual serves as occurrence, is not collaborative in and of itself. It is only in the 'doing' of relational practices virtually that technology becomes collaborative. Thereupon, the chapter puts forward an understanding of how virtual teams change the relation between technology and relationality.

The recognition that it is critical to acknowledge and account for the virtual context in which dispersed collaboration takes place is, obviously, anything but breakthrough. However, despite the simplicity in this observation, the field of organisation studies has yet to express sensitivity towards the virtual context (Griffith, 2012; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). More explicit attention to the subtle ways relationality developed in virtual dimensions is arguably more relevant to practice, and closer to the changes in the workplace. For doing so, the chapter is concerned with letting go off the anchor of physicality that pervades the literature, and suggests instead centring on relationality to grasp the context *in use* of virtual teams, through a discussion of time-space, leadership, trust, and team cohesion versus flexibility. Thereupon, the main concern in the chapter is to provide a relational theorising of collaboration in virtual teams; one that addresses their context, together with the ways such a context shapes up relationality. This in itself is an important endeavour, in view of the lack of theoretical approaches in organisation studies that take the work arrangement of virtual teams beyond traditional framings (Bakken, Holt, & Zundel, 2013; Golden & Geisler, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Hernes, Simpson, & Söderlund, 2013; Vesa & Franck, 2013). From this vantage point, the chapter approaches the virtual turn in contemporary organisations by centring important virtuality dimensions in dispersed collaboration; namely, those of time-space, leadership, trust, and team cohesion versus flexibility. In doing so, it sheds light on the ways work life in virtual teams is organised, conducted and controlled with technology. The chapter develops as follow. To begin with, there is a discussion about how virtual teams have come to signify an important organisational phenomenon. Then, the theoretical approach of the chapter is presented, giving way to addressing the dimensions of virtuality: time-space, leadership, trust and the struggle between cohesion and flexibility. Finally, the implications for future theoretical and empirical developments in research on dispersed collaboration are discussed.

## BACKGROUND

In the modern world of technology and internationalisation, work often crosses the physical boundaries of an organisation. (Boh, Ren, Kiesler, & Bussjaeger, 2007; Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015). As such, the work arrangement of virtual teams emerges and points to rethinking traditional concepts of theorising team-work and collaboration in organisation studies (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). Although separated

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