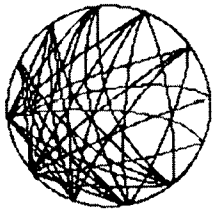
INTRODUCTION



COMING HOME

Virtual Teams is the final book in a trilogy on network organizations that we have been writing since 1991. With this hook, we bring networks down to earth, to people who work with others in small groups stretched across space, time, and organizations. Having asked the question of hundreds of very diverse audiences, we know that most of you regularly work with people located more than 50 feet from your workplace. Therefore you have at least a distance problem to solve in order to work collaboratively (see Chapter 1).

Virtual Teams is about a radically new type of small group emerging in the Age of the Network. These boundary-spanning centers of people-to-people activity are the social cells that make up larger network organizations. They are small task-oriented groups from the executive suite to the front line. Webs of interactions and relationships bind them together.

? **Teams: In** *Virtual Teams,* we take a deep look at how this most fundamental organization—the team—is transforming ("morphing," in computer lingo) into an extraordinary new 21st-century version. We focus on small groups of people working across boundaries supported by the new computer and communications

technologies. Increasingly, this is the reality of everyday work life for many people.

- **Teamnets:** In our 1993 book, *The TeamNet Factor,'* we center on the network as a form of organization. We show its variations at every size from small groups, to enterprises, to alliances, to nations. In that book, we coin the word *teamnet* to put people back into networks and to emphasize their multilevel (groups within groups) nature. We show how networks offer practical approaches to solving old problems and launching new initiatives. We also offer three chapters on methods to develop networks along with several chapters that focus specifically on small business networks.
- **Networks:** In our 1994 book, *The Age of the Network,*[2] we provide an overview of the impact of networks and their strategic importance. There, we place networks—the signature organization of the Information Age—in the context of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and small groups, which dominated earlier eras. We show how companies use networks to their strategic advantage. These nimble, boundary-crossing configurations also incorporate what is uniquely valuable about each of the earlier forms.

In the years since we began writing this trilogy, technologies that directly impact networks have significantly expanded the spectrum of options for people to connect with one another. One noticeable example is this now ubiquitous form of address that we see many times each day:

Visit our Web site at http://www.netage.com

Cyberspace words, known only by a select group in the early 1990s, have become daily occurrences—such as the Internet, the World Wide Web, hypertext, and intranets. All these and many more technologies contribute to a dramatically extended ability for teams to work together at a distance.

This book is about organizations that spread out and reach across boundaries. They do so with the help of and in response to technology. Technology extends our capabilities, but organizing to do things together is still a human capability. The people side of the organization/technology relationship is the focus of *Virtual Teams*.

Experience at the Source

Our research combines the knowledge of the people we interviewed with our own experience over many years working within and between organizations as consultants and participants.

With *Virtual Teams,* we come home to the heart of our personal experience. We have always worked in small groups across distances and organizational boundaries.

Research for this book began long ago at the dawn of our relationship in 1968, when we met as students at Oxford University. A few years later, married, living in our first (and still only) house with our first "personal computer" (a Wang 600 Programmable Calculator), we began life as independent entrepreneurs with a consulting business.

Virtual teams have been away of life for us for twenty-five years. We have partnered with thousands of people on a wide range of projects for clients in every sector—from Digital Equipment Corporation, to the national Presbyterian Church, to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Since 1979 when we began to contact people and gather information for our first book on networked organizations *(Networking,*[3] published in 1982), we have received volumes of material from all around the world. We have heard from people in more than half the world's countries and visited with networkers from every continent, including Antarctica!

As writers, researchers, speakers, seminar leaders, and consultants, we have known and been part of many very different types of organizations. From engagements that lasted only a few hours, to projects of a few days, to multiyear programs, we have acted as "drop-in" outside experts, involved facilitators, core members, and leaders of customer teams. We have worn corporate badges, received passwords to internal

computer systems, and occupied offices within our clients' buildings. We have even worn the badges of our customers' customers. Although we draw primarily on examples from the business community in this trilogy, our quarter-century of research and experience is also extensive in government, nonprofit, and grassroots organizations. These are the focus of our first two books, *Networking*, and its 1986 successor, *The Networking Book.*[4]

Theory and Application

Since our first book on networks, we have strived to integrate our work into a coherent conceptual framework supported by general systems theory. Systems theory is about principles and patterns of organization that apply across scientific disciplines—notoriously difficult boundaries to cross. Human systems were the subject of Jeff's 1980 book (and doctoral dissertation), *Holonomy*.[5] Systems principles have helped us recognize common patterns among the awesome variety of human organizations, particularly the core features of the newly emerging forms. They provide a powerful infrastructure for the network organizational model that we have been developing and testing for almost two decades.

Theory is very practical. It enables quick adaptation of shared learning to always unique circumstances. Theory provides a consistent, share-able, knowledge-based approach to develop and manage virtual teams. Theory also provides a framework to test ideas and improve practical knowledge about how to work collaboratively at a distance.

Originally, we recognized ten principles[6] of network structure and process, which threaded through our first two books. We consolidated the principles to five[7] in *The TeamNet Factor* and *The Age of the Network*. Since frontier knowledge never stands still, we reconsidered the principles for this book. In our ongoing effort to improve our conceptual tools, we have:

? Simplified the basic elements of a virtual team to three—people, purpose, and links; and

? Expanded the principles from five to nine, which provide a more comprehensive set of guidelines for the "care and feeding" of virtual teams.

When Things Go Awry

Virtual teams are not a panacea for teams that do not work. Quite the contrary. It is harder for virtual teams to be successful than for traditional face-to-face teams. Misunderstandings are more likely to arise and more things are likely to go wrong.

We are not cheerleading for this gee-whiz-it's-a-new-and-better-way-to-do-things approach. Rather, our goal is to understand and improve virtual teams. Virtual teams are already prevalent and increasingly more will appear in the years ahead. Indeed, lack of recognition that teams have gone virtual contributes to the high failure rate of today's teams. When teams spread out, they have a dramatic effect on the entire management structure. There are more virtual teams working at all levels than you realize, and the way they work is likely different from what you think.

Everything that goes wrong with in-the-same-place teams also plagues virtual teams—often it is worse. Egos, power plays, backstabbing, hurt feelings, low confidence, poor self-esteem, leaderlessness, and lack of trust all weaken virtual teams. When communication breaks down, it requires that people take measures to repair it. It is just that much more difficult to communicate across distance and organizations.

Many of the problems that teams encounter are ancient in nature. Millennia of face-to-face exchanges inform most of our collective experience, tools, techniques, and lore. Methods that work to correct problems that arise in face-to-face teams are only a starting point for virtual teams.

We address the problems of *virtual* teams as directly as possible and present what people do to solve them. At the same time, we encourage you to draw on what you already know about teams. For example, what do you do if a virtual team member is not participating? The same thing you do if a face-to-face team member is not participating. Talk to that

person by any means possible, find out what is preventing participation, and solve the problem.

Common sense and the large body of excellent material developed by team experts over the past several decades provide some solutions to these problems. We reference these sources extensively in the Notes. Gradually, a body of detailed knowledge and technique will develop for the field-in-the-making, "Virtual OD" (Organizational Development).

We do not go into detail about *why* companies form virtual teams. So far as we can tell, companies create these distributed organizations for myriad reasons. People form virtual teams when things go wrong, when the people required to do a project happen to be spread out, and just because virtual teams are the best way to get things done in a particular instance.

Our purpose here is to present excellent examples of virtual teams and our thinking about how virtual teams *can* work and meet challenges. Thus, this is a book that shares best practices, not one that critically examines corporate behavior. In time, as the body of information grows, critical analysis will be essential to secure the foundations of network knowledge.

Finally, we are still in the early phases of the transformation from hierarchy-bureaucracy to networks. Virtual teams will expand as a key way to work for as far as we can see into the future. Consider this book an opening view of a future society of work.

Options for Reading This Book

Different people have different preferred ways of learning new information. Some learn best from stories based on experience, some prefer theoretical approaches, others need practical ideas, and most of us need some vision to motivate us to move to the new ways of working. Readers of our previous books will recognize how we paint a whole canvas from these four kinds of views on this difficult-to-grasp subject.

- Vision (insight);
- Stories (experience);

? Principles (theory); and
? How-to (practice).

While we have written a traditional book crafted with loving care to flow from beginning-to-end, we know that people have their own styles for reading books. Some of you begin at the end, some in the middle, while still others skim to find something of interest.

? For an introduction to virtual teams, a definition, some examples of how companies use them in both low and high tech "versions," and an overview of the principles, read Chapter 1, "Why Virtual Teams?"
? For people who learn primarily through the stories of how others have done it, turn to the opening sections of Chapters 2 through 7. There you will find the detailed case studies of six companies with impressive and sometimes astonishing virtual teams. Many other examples appear throughout the text.
? For those who prefer concepts and models, read the sections at the end of those chapters. There you will find an integrated framework to understand and manage this new form of organization. We include important contributions from other writers and researchers.
? For those most interested in how these ideas apply as tools and methods, go to Chapter 8, "Working Smart: A Web Book for Virtual Teams," our handbook for starting and maintaining virtual teams.
? For those who wish to begin with a vision of what virtual teams mean for society, turn to Chapter 9, "Virtual Values."

You can gain a quick overview of the book by reading the headings, looking at the illustrations, and noting the emphasized phrases:

> *Key ideas in the book are in pull-out quotes that look like this.*

As in our previous books, we provide extensive Notes so that readers can go directly to our sources and learn more for themselves. The abundance of material available through the World Wide Web made it easy for us to track down many facts and locate specific sources. We include the addresses for the Web sites that we reference in the book. See our Web site for more detailed information and practical pointers on virtual teams.