

# TRUST IN VIRTUAL MILITARY TEAMS

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## Abstract

*This paper examines trust in global military teams. The relationship between perceived levels of trust and efficiency in working in virtual military teams is investigated. The issue of trust is considered in a number of situations. Questionnaires were used to gather factual data about respondents, how often they worked within a global design team, and their preferred method of communication, how their global military teams compared to military team-working carried out with co-located members; and their opinion of how the operation of global teams could be improved, particularly related to trust. In addition, there was a focus group meeting consisting of team leaders, to explore the concerns and issues highlighted through the questionnaire.*

**Keywords:** virtual teams, military, trust.

## Introduction

Military work can sometimes require the use of virtual networks to make use of global team-working. They can involve globally dispersed temporary partners in temporary projects. Individuals in teams may know each other but often they may not. These teams depend upon trusting relationships being developed quickly. Virtual military teams represent a new form of organization that offers increased levels of flexibility and responsiveness.

Military organizations have more knowledge workers and more emphasis is being placed upon trust between collaborating individuals. The ability to respond to change within military virtual groups requires high levels of agility, which affects our traditional ideas of command, organization, leadership and management. Technologies are now using improved communication technology to support the increased need for agility.

Because rules, and procedures may be difficult to apply in a Virtual Team, trust becomes more important. Virtuality requires trust to make it work; technology on its own is not enough' [1].

Jones & Bowie [2] quoted in [3] argue that 'the efficiency of virtual corporations depends on speed and flexibility and that requires mutual trust and cooperation.

Trust is defined in [3] as the individual's (or group's) belief that another individual (or group) makes good faith efforts to behave in accordance with any commitments both explicit and implicit. Baier's [4] definition of trust is the accepted vulnerability to another's possible but not expected ill-will (or lack of goodwill) towards someone. Other definitions of trust are given in [5], [6], and [7].

Trust is generally influenced by:

- familiarity of the individuals in the relationship over a significant period of time;
- shared experiences and goals;
- reciprocal disclosure between individuals over time;
- demonstration of non-exploitation expressed over time.

According to Fox [8], trust is also related to the degree of regulation in the business. Ackroyd and Thompson [9] developed this concept and suggest that there can be organizations that have either high or low trust regimes. Low trust regimes are characterized by general mistrust and suspicion and are often related to continuous surveillance. Such systems are also often associated with high degrees of regulation and surveillance of the individuals.

Both Fox and Ackroyd and Thompson identify four types of relationship:

- Low trust: high regulation. This leads to recalcitrance/ militancy.
- Low trust: low regulation. This leads to an indulgency pattern.
- High trust: high regulation. This leads to controlled autonomy.
- High trust: low regulation. This leads to responsible autonomy.

The most desirable culture would appear to be high trust and low regulation [3]. However, high trust and high regulation is a common form of work situation in military organisations. Low trust and high regulation can be produced by a spiral of alienation combined with increasing surveillance to control individuals.

Modern military organisations carry out work in globally dispersed teams, collaborating across global boundaries. In these temporary groups there may not be sufficient time for conventional views of trust to operate. Trust in virtual teams also presents significant challenges because it is difficult to assess trustworthiness without ever having met team-mates [10].

In addition, as virtual teams sometimes only exist for short times, trust must develop quickly [11]. Yet, trust is crucial for the successful completion of virtual team projects [12]. Trust in temporary systems seems to lead to a unique view of trust that is rapidly able to manage the issues of vulnerability uncertainty, risk, and expectations.

Meyerson et al. [13] developed the concept of 'swift-trust' for temporary teams formed around a task that has a finite lifetime. Interpersonal relationships in military virtual teams are likely to be built on similar personal relationships and professional characteristics (and similar military training and qualifications), and this may lead to the formation of swift-trust.

Task communication maintains trust while social communications (and explicit statements of commitment, excitement, and optimism) strengthen trust. Finally, initial actions of team members and their responses are critical to trust development.

Cultural and language differences are common in global virtual military teams across different allies. Cameron and Quinn [14] have defined four cultures and provided a means of measuring them in organizations. The four cultures are also outlined in reference [3].

## Research

The research was based on that in [3]. An attempt was made to measure whether there was a relationship between perceived levels of trust and organizational culture (as depicted by Cameron and Quinn [14]). The perceived levels of trust in the case of virtual organizations would essentially be the formation of swift-trust.

Two military organisations were sampled for this research, both with units spread around the world.

At Organisation 1, global virtual team-working was becoming common, primarily between the UK and the USA. A questionnaire to study employee opinions related to global working was sent to a random sample of 32 UK employees from Organisation 1 who took part in global team-working; 16 returns were received.

Organisation 2 was already operating in a European environment and often other team participants were from organizations distributed around Europe. The members of the organisation were working as members of virtual teams on relatively short-term projects (less than a year).

A slightly modified questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 29 UK employees from Organisation 2 who took part in global team-working; 19 returns were received. The modification was in asking about their function and location as the possible options were different to those in Organisation 1.

Four principal forms of data were obtained that were similar to those described in [3]:

- Factual data about the respondent and their function, location, etc.;
- How often they worked within a global design team, and their preferred method of communication;
- How their global virtual military teams compared to military team-working carried out with co-located members; and
- Their opinion of how global design teams operation could be improved – particularly related to the trust issue.

In addition, there was a focus group meeting consisting of team leaders, to explore the concerns and issues of global team-working that were highlighted through the questionnaire.

An aim was to develop some general guidelines providing advice about trust that would result in effective virtual working.

As found in [3], work on in-house trust is sensitive and there were security issues to consider so that the names of the organisations are not revealed here.

**Results**

Some of the responses from the questionnaire are depicted below:

Types of virtual teams that employees work in?

- Organisation 1: Combat (7), Logistics (4), other (5).
- Organisation 2: Command (8), Control (5), Communications (3), other (3).

How long did you work in a virtual team?

- Organisation 1: Less than 1 year (12), 1–2 years (4), 2–3 years (3), 3–4 years (1), more than 4 years (1)
- Organisation 2: Less than 1 year (10), 1–2 years (12), 2–3 years (2), 3–4 years (1), more than 4 (0)

Indicate the percentage of your time that you spend working with team members who are not in the same geographic region as you.

- Organisation 1: 0–20 per cent (8), 21–40 per cent (4), 41–60 per cent (3), above 61 per cent (1)
- Organisation 2: 0–20 per cent (10), 21–40 per cent (6), 41–60 per cent (2), above 61 per cent (1)

Did an international time difference make it difficult to find a convenient time to hold a meeting?

- Organisation 1: (8/16) 50 per cent said ‘yes’ and (6/16) 31 per cent said ‘no’
- Organisation 2: (10/19) 52 per cent said ‘yes’ and (7/19) 31 per cent said ‘no’

Globally dispersed teams deliver objectives as effectively as co-located teams.

- Organisation 1: Disagree (8), No view (2), Agree (6)
- Organisation 2: Disagree (9), No view (8), Agree (2)

What is the correct size for a project team?

- Organisation 1: The two largest responses were: 5–10 members (8), 10–15 members (4)

- Organisation 2: The two largest responses were: 1–5 members (6), 5–10 members (6).

The focus was on the communication methods and how these contributed to the building of swift-trust. A synopsis of the main responses regarding communication are given in Table 1.

The methods of communication play an important part in building of trust [13].

- Organisation 1: For the question on communication methods: email was the main communication medium, (used daily); on average 12 face-to-face meetings per team took place per year; video conferencing, email conferencing, or audio conferencing took place at least once a week, followed by telephone calls and conferencing, then chat sites or systems and then video conferencing.
- Organisation 2: For the question on communication methods: email was the main communication medium, followed by secure telephone, then secure radio and then secure video conferencing.

**Table 1 Communication experience - Organisation 1**

Communication experience	Yes	No
Was the appropriate communications technology available to conduct the meeting?	14	2
Was there an open and trusting atmosphere during the meeting?	13	3
Could you openly question the opinion of others?	11	5
Were there any social or personal conversations?	11	5
Were agreements effectively reached and documented?	12	4

**Table 2 Communication experience - Organisation 2**

Communication experience	Yes	No
Was the appropriate communications technology available to conduct the meeting?	16	3
Was there an open and trusting atmosphere during the meeting?	14	5
Could you openly question the opinion of others?	12	7
Were there any social or personal conversations?	10	9
Were agreements effectively reached and documented?	13	6

The respondents, though being globally distributed, found that the meetings were held in trusting environments. Also, there were a large number of face-to-face meetings coupled with video conferencing happening in the conduct of these virtual teams. Did the type of communication have any effect on the meeting environment being trusting?

In order to study this issue and some of the managerial and command issues in depth, a focus group was initiated with each organisation. The sample size for this focus group discussion was 3 Team Leaders.

All the team leaders thought that pressures and demands placed upon them were more immediate and could not be ignored as easily as those imposed by the globally dispersed teams or remote manager. Also face-to-face meetings were the only way to ensure that rapport was achieved. Although the teams were globally dispersed for some of their work the members did seem to travel considerably and there were many face-to-face meetings, (although when longer distances were involved the number reduced, for example the USA compared with Europe). Face-to-face meetings were considered to be important in building trust and much better than no physical contact (for example only ever communicating by telephone or video conferencing).

Location and skill appeared to be the most important criteria for the selection of team members. Most of the people in the teams did have some knowledge of other team participants although they may not have worked in a virtual team with them before. Tasks for Organisation 1 were generally complex military or logistic tasks. Tasks for Organisation 2 were generally command and control or logistic tasks. According to the views of the respondents, trust levels were high from the start of every project and this appeared to be based upon shared professionalism, identification with the organisation, a shared need to succeed, and solidarity of beliefs. There was no evidence of opportunistic behaviour by one or more individuals at the expense of others. Opportunistic behaviour was considered to be unlikely. However, the view was expressed that if any opportunistic behaviour did take place then trust would be compromised for future working relationships with the individuals concerned, and since there was a significant chance that they would work together again some time in the future there were strong constraints against opportunism.

Results showed the extent of the global team-working within the organisations and involving external partners. It did show clearly that face-to-face meetings helped in trust formation among the members.

### Discussion and conclusions

From the analysis of data collected from Organisation 1 there does seem to be evidence for the formation of swift-trust in these highly professional teams. The questionnaire as well as the focus group discussion identified the fact that trust levels were high right from the start of any project.

The effect of communication on the maintenance of trust during the working of these teams was also suggested. It was also evident that there was a storming phase of team development later in the project during the face-to-face meetings. It was suggested that 'face-to-face' meetings were the only way to ensure that rapport was achieved. It was considered more appropriate to hold a meeting in a single location with all parties when setting up a new team.

Video conferencing was one of the cost-effective methods used to generate some visual method of communication if 'face-to-face' meetings were not appropriate or possible. However, it was found that there were issues with using 'video conferencing', which related to the inability to read body language, lack of a physical presence, and a time delay between different locations for communicating. When the team members were distant from each other they worked on independent work packages and mutual adjustment of the work occurred when team members conducted their face-to-face meetings. In addition, swift-trust was observed based upon common goals of the group and a belief in each other's professional integrity.

Respondents suggested they would prefer a high trusting organization when working as virtual teams.

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