Trust is the foundation for teamwork, whether face-to face or in virtual teams. But trust is hard to establish, especially when teams are frequently changing and team members haven't had long to gel. At Orange, a lack of trust among teams was proving a major hindrance to product development and collaboration was often non-existent. Here, Debbie Lawley explains how the company overcame this problem and embedded trust at the very heart of its virtual team operations.

CREATING TRUST IN VIRTUAL TEAMS AT ORANGE

Overcoming barriers to collaboration

By Debbie Lawley, Willow Transformations

Debbie Lawley
is a specialist in knowledge and learning having been responsible for developing and implementing strategy in these fields for the Orange group of companies over the past four years.

Orange is a fast moving business in a dynamic market and an unpredictable, competitive environment. Mobile handsets no longer just make calls but can browse the internet, make transactions stream video and more. With changes in charging mechanisms too, following the entry of players like Skype, the telecommunications field is particularly demanding. A major difficulty is managing the balance between cost competitiveness, the need for excellence in delivery to maintain customer satisfaction and the drive for innovation to sustain long term growth. Consequently, product development in this area is a considerable challenge. In addition, the complexities of working in a multinational environment mean that collaboration is critical.

Boosting collaboration

The focus of knowledge management in this area of Orange was on increasing collaboration and recognizing that improved performance here would be of substantial benefit. More innovation was the main objective and the virtual team structure was a key enabler. However, the issue of trust was causing less than effective co-operation across these virtual teams. The KM work had to focus on this issue, achieve insight into what approaches work well here and embed those approaches into the collaborative working

program. In this article, we'll look at exactly how this happened.

A colorful background

Orange launched in 1994, the fourth entrant in the busy UK market where its operations were focused. Product development at that time was largely focused in the delivery of calls and network excellence. Many of the business demands revolved around meeting exponential customer growth.

Through advances in mobile technology and, in 1999, a new owner in France Telecom, the landscape had changed for Orange. Product development had been conducted in the operating company in the UK. Now as a largely pan-European organization, together with presence in Africa and the Middle East, a different approach was required.

The strength of the brand was a key aspect in the desirability of Orange for France Telecom and ensuring the benefits of the brand were maximized in all the operating companies was essential in consolidating the Orange Group. This meant that the products and services coming through to delivery in all the operating companies needed consistency and yet local flavour appropriate to the market concerned. The challenge was to execute this exceptionally well.

The KM team was asked to assist the Orange product marketing and development teams in enhancing product delivery and innovation. Working with the process definition team, the KM team developed several approaches to support this goal.

Orange
is the mobile communications branch of France Telecom. It'ss one of the UK's leading mobile phone service providers and also provides services to 57 million customers across 17 countries. *www.orange.com*

Virtual teams

Most of the people working in product development in Orange Group work in virtual teams. The product manager is usually the leader of the team. Virtual teams are flexible and versatile in many companies but they have their challenges. Few people choose to work in virtual teams and often, only a critical business issue will force people to collaborate in such a way.

Upon analysis, the KM team found that the working life of many people in the Group function consisted of working in several different forms of structures, in any one week. Sometimes they would be in their functional teams, sometimes in co-located project work. But most of the time, people in the product development function were working across boundaries, across physical structures and across reporting lines in virtual teams. This is an emerging feature of global organizations, especially those in high tech industries.

The KM team needed a framework for great practice in virtual team leadership. There was precious little information around that suited the context at Orange. At the time, Orange participated in a network of industries on the subject of knowledge and innovation (KIN), overseen by Warwick Business School where a project on virtual teams was underway and Orange was taking part. The project's outcome was a series of key points that summarized good practice in this field. The KM team took these points and added Orange anecdotes and stories to make a source book. This was then developed into a collaborative training program to include familiarity on communication methods as well as an action-learning workshop on virtual team leadership.

Further work was undertaken to assess specific virtual teams using a questionnaire method, report and coaching. The pilots went well and acted as an important tool in team building.

The role of trust

One of the aspects tackled in the framework was that of trust (see Figure 1, right).

The guide and the action-learning workshop featured specific advice on the subject of trust including developing and sustaining trust. Further topics included investing early in the team and the role of informal conversations. However, as more of the program rolled out and more evidence emerged, it did seem that this was still a thorny issue and one that many virtual team leaders were struggling with. There was a real desire to learn more about trust and understand better how trust "operates" and what a leader can do to make the difference.
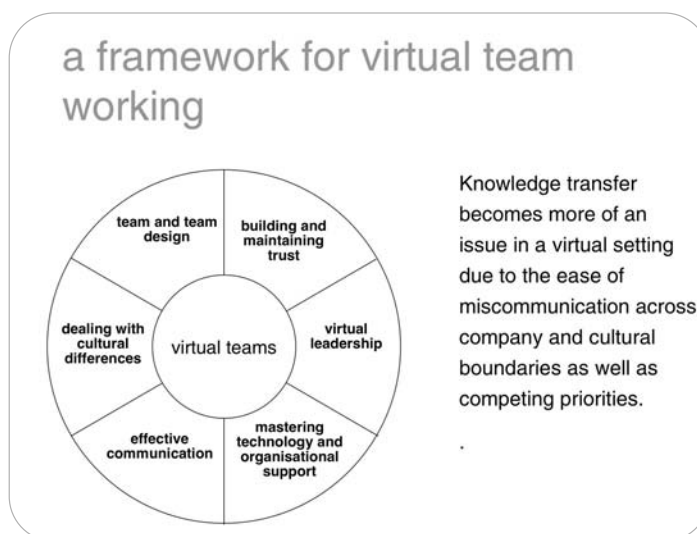
KEYPOINTS

- Trust is a fundamental component of team working.
- At Orange, a lack of trust hindered product development and collaboration among virtual project teams.
- It's better to form small virtual teams with well defined scope rather than large virtual teams with complex interrelationships.
- What you might attempt with a co-located team should be simpler and more contained with a virtual team.
- Good leadership will build trust through merging individual cultures into a team culture.
- Preconceived frameworks about the way a team should work may get in the way of attending to local obligations and requests from distant colleagues at the same time.

Part of the issue was simply in the physical proximity of virtual teams or rather, the lack of it. When groups are colocated they interact in an informal way, get to know each other and work up an idea of the reputation of people, and establish their credibility or their "trustworthiness." Once dispersal creeps in this gets much harder. Project teams start to suffer a little in this way as often some part of the contributors are not located with others and face to face team meetings go to great lengths to ensure that progress and communication are well understood. Once a team is completely virtual, all informal contact disappears and the credibility of the team players has to be recognized in different ways (see Figures 2 and 3, overpage). The role of the KM team here was to provide specific advice on team design, activities and approaches that would overcome this issue.

Questions of trust

In fact there were three questions on trust:

Figure 1. The Orange framework for virtual team working

a framework for virtual team working

team and team design · building and maintaining trust · virtual leadership · mastering technology and organisational support · effective communication · dealing with cultural differences · virtual teams

Knowledge transfer becomes more of an issue in a virtual setting due to the ease of miscommunication across company and cultural boundaries as well as competing priorities.

"PERCEIVING PEOPLE TO BE HIGH PERFORMERS REDUCES THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THEY WILL RENEGE ON TASKS AND SO INCREASES TRUST"

1. To what extent is trust important for virtual team performance?
2. What influences trust in virtual teams?
3. How can trust be developed and maintained in virtual teams?

Happily, a very exhaustive literature review had already been done by John Gill and David Birchall of Henley Management college, UK, in 2004. This provided a useful source of research material behind the case studies and experience at Orange and a great help in answering the first question.

The reality of life in many complex multinational firms is that most work is fulfilled in virtual teams of one type or another. Many of these are transitory and dynamic, with team members spending short periods working with people where they may or may not have any previous experience. This method of working leads to increased diversity and potentially high levels of creativity and innovation. On the downside, it can lead to less interpersonal similarities and fewer common backgrounds and experiences. Frequently, there are also global needs of the corporate in opposition to the local needs of the revenue generating local operating unit. The fact remains that trust is the foundation for all team

Figure 2: Knowlege transfer among virtual teams

work, virtual or not. In virtual teams there are no formal ties and without physical control of presence, trust is both more important and harder. There's potential to deliver "unique strategic flexibility" but they have their dark side in the form of low levels of trust and cooperation which can impact performance.

The research literature confirms that virtual teams that have higher levels of trust outperform those with lower levels of trust. Trust reduces the need to contractualize work or impose checks which slows down activity. Increased trust allows – as a consequence – for work to be organized more quickly, with more creativity and more belief. When things go wrong, it allows higher levels of empathy in tackling co-operational problems.

In summary, trust reduces costs in working together either through increased creativity or the need for reduced control which then impacts productivity, while "distrust is one of the major costs involved in transacting across boundaries." (Zucker et al 1996). To counteract this, the job within companies is to reduce the perceived distances between people in virtual teams by aligning thoughts and actions so we understand each other better, are better able to use complimentary skills and have common goals. To do this, you need to ask: what influences trust in virtual teams?

Vital components to trust in virtual teams
Trust is built upon:
- perceived ability;
- benevolence; and
- feeling positive about other people in the group and the group's integrity.

In virtual teams, the above can be the product of stereotypical views of how effective that unit is, built upon hearsay and subjective criticism rather than fact based or through insight. The conditions that will affect this foundation are the quality of interactions between team members, the level of interdependence and the degree of participation and influence. All of this is harder in virtual teams and face to face contact remains the most effective way of building trust.

Being like each other raises the degree of trust although this reduces diversity (which is the subject of a different debate altogether). Being connected to each other and being reliant on each other increases trust but can impact when that's a source of stress. The higher the degree of social change in the team, the lower the levels of trust.

Perceiving people to be high performers reduces the likelihood that they will renege on
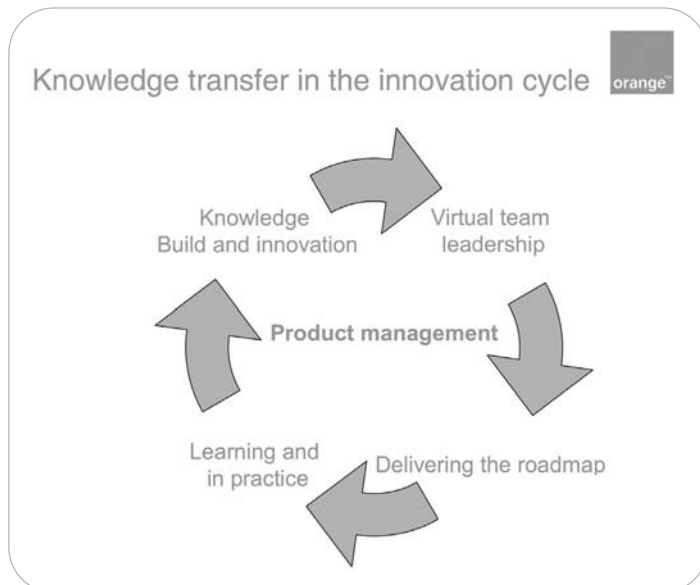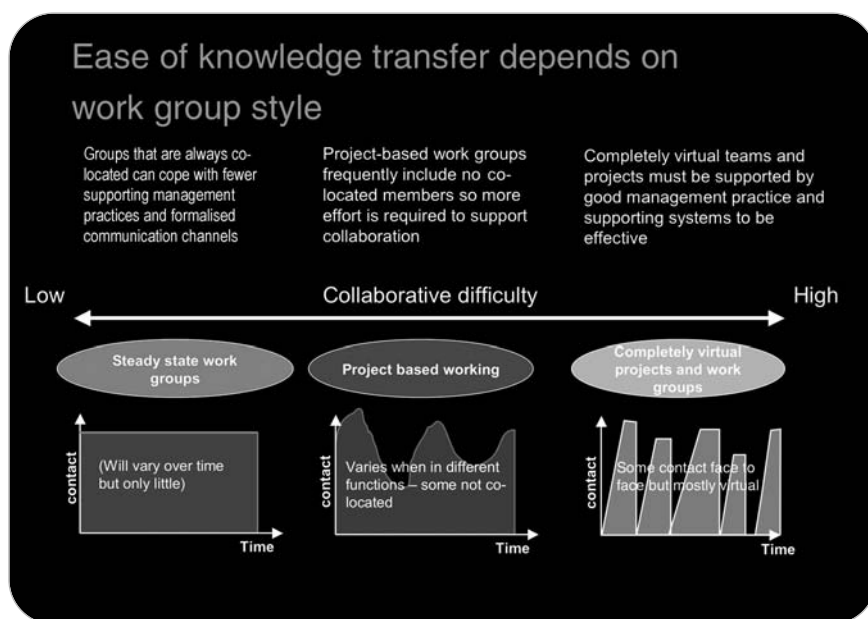
On the left, groups that are consistent with members and location have less difficulty in collaboration and knowledge is transferred with little difficulty.

On the right, completely virtual teams and projects must be supported by good management, leadership and support systems. Knowledge transfer can prove very difficult in these cirumstances.

tasks and so increases trust. This is a good lesson for all of us – if we treat people as though they will do a good job, the likelihood is that they will. These facts confirmed three principles to the KM team – keep small virtual teams, develop good leadership within a team culture and establish a common framework for all team members. Each principle is described below.

Principle 1 – small virtual teams
It's better to form small virtual teams with well defined scope rather than large virtual teams with complex interrelationships. What you might attempt with a co-located team should be simpler and more contained with a virtual team.

At Orange, there were a number of times where we were attempting very ambitious, corporate-wide programs, which were generally very complicated and we didn't necessarily recognize certain aspects of the complexities, because you tend only to think about the technical complexities.

What you might not tend to think about is the complexities of implementation in different local environments, with different teams and different infrastructures all with a different way of understanding. It's only really when you've thought that through in terms of the levels of complication, that you realize that what we intended to embark upon were really very difficult and challenging programs.

Of course, the bigger the program, the longer they last and the more likely it is that the

environment around you will change. Following a review of a series of large virtal team projects, it was decided we would attempt to do things in a much tighter scope. It means fewer relationships to handle and it works on many different levels. When you look at trust, the more complex the program, the more likelihood is that you're going to be dealing with a wider range of people and that in itself is hard to handle when you're aim is to get good foundations of trust. Therefore it's much better to keep it tighter, with fewer relationships to handle, and a far greater likelihood that you'll be able to develop good, trusting relationships.

The perfect number for team sizes
A good number for a tightly knit virtual team – and you have to remember they tend to flex anyway over the length of project so the size of a team can be different as the project progresses – but if you think in terms of having a hard core of individuals who're contributors, if you can keep that to under 10 that's ideal to keep it nice and tight. When you're dealing with very large virtual teams of over 30 or 40, managing the relationships can be an unwarranted nightmare.

Principle 2 – leadership doesn't determine trust from the outset.
Good leadership will build trust through merging individual cultures into a team culture. There are many of instances in virtual teams where the level of trust has been poor and because individuals are working only on a local priorities. There's no sense ◔

"IN VIRTUAL TEAMS, THE WORK REALLY ONLY STARTS AFTER THE FIRST FACE TO FACE MEETING BETWEEN ALL MEMBERS OF TEAM."

of joint engagement because people hadn't brought in anything other than "nodding assent" (when people nod round a table in agreement but really there's been no engagement at all). In this situation, there's barely any cooperation and certainly no collaboration. As a consequence of that, as soon as people leave that table, the local priorities are the only ones that take precedence. Subsequently, you see behaviors including a lack of return e-mails and silence. It's usually silence – not hostilities breaking out – that you'll find. One of the virtual team leaders at Orange said to me, "work really only starts after that first face-to-face meeting."

Principle 3 – the leader's job is to establish a common team framework

Preconceived frameworks about the way a team should work may get in the way of attending to local obligations and requests from distant colleagues at the same time. The leader's job is to establish a common framework that makes sense of all demands and shared objectives.

A very good virtual team leader at Orange, who was very sensitive to the needs of how he worked as a leader, asked for his team to be assessed and reviewed.

One of the things that came up in the review was the relations between the UK section of the virtual team and a part of the team in Paris. The team had conference calls with the Parisians calling in. The British contingent often tended to try and make it a better meeting by using humor quite a lot. This might sound like a good idea, but actually it had a profoundly negative effect and isolated the team members in Paris. This was for two reasons. One they couldn't see the facial expressions and be part of the humor, but second of course, British humor is very particular and it's not well understood by people from other languages. This is an example where an approach that seemed to be favorable in one culture had an isolating effect in another. You wouldn't necessarily have guessed that and you only see that when you enter discussions on how people feel things are going and ask how engaged people feel, for that sort of thing to be unearthed.

Another thing thing is that you don't want to disinfranchise peopl. In the previous example, it

might have been better for all parties to be on audio and separate phones, rather than the British group together and then the Parisians separate – it would have leveled the playing field.

Developing and maintaining trust

The last of the three questions, how can trust be developed and maintained in virtual teams?

Many facts emerge from the literature and from experience at Orange. For example, the style of management most likely to forge trust is one that focuses on measuring outputs rather than managing the process. It's better to concentrate on the objective rather than keeping an eye on what people are up to. In virtual teaming it's important to manage a wider range of stakeholders including the line managers of the people doing work for you. You need their confidence and trust.

Better results in building trust come from team set-up and the early stages of team working – focus on building common purpose. It's wise to select staff that have a higher capacity to trust and prefer independent working. Leaders that have higher capabilities in communication, coaching and are better facilitators will do better at building trust.

A specific activity that's required in a virtual team, is the role of the leader in building the credibility of the team players. In other words, the team will not inherently know people by reputation. It's the role of the leader to establish in a purposeful way, what people are on the team, their track records and the nature of their expertise. Gill and Birchall sum this up well: "the need for swift trust is essential – this will be based in the first instance on personal reputation and credibility."

Embedding practice in building trust

There were plenty of facts and approaches that emerged from the research and from summarizing Orange experience. The need was to then ensure that these approaches were embedded in such a way that it changed habits and ways of working. The collaborative program itself was easy to adjust, it was just a question of inserting material into the workshops that reflected the good practice. In addition to that, the trust issue was also embedded into the virtual team assessments, team coaching and team building material.

The other key method of getting the message out was to look at stories and case studies that reflected this way of working and ensure that these were endorsed and reflected upon within the company. This included the community style of working, which used many of the techniques above and reflected the changing role of the product

manager from the controller of the product roadmap to the facilitator of the product community.

The final part of the trust story

The overall outcome of this approach has been to recognize that innovation is born from the quality of conversations that people are able to have and that quality is impacted by difficulties in the collaborative climate.

An excellent method of ensuring that the trust capability is embedded and further developed as close to the working area as possible and the overall approach has moved from a simple management process to a more cyclical approach with the building of trust as a planned activity at the outset through knowledge build and then team formation.

While the change process is still ongoing, early results are encouraging. In an employee climate survey, 94 percent of respondents now agreed their has been a great improvement in the way they're working. It's difficult to convey how much of change this was. When compared to the situation before, which had become a little bit antagonistic, to a situation where people are feeling far more up beat and far more positive that working at Orange was a true collaborative environment. That was a real achievement. The popularity of the collaborative working program has led to a roll-out to all operating countries to set the context for them, even if they themselves are not leading virtual teams. The aim is to increase the collaborative capability of the company as a whole, through increased awareness of the role of trust and the methods available to achieve this. **KM** REVIEW

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Orange case study: improving performance with trust

Karen Sinclair, product manager for voice Voicemail (answerphone services), had been working with the countries for six months on the voice activated services program (VAS). Having built relationships with the country product managers (CPMs), it was clear the development of a community to discuss hot topics, share best practice and establish a best in class product would be beneficial to for voicemail.

"We gain consensus by identifying where value is added," says Sinclair. "When we show by example and tell a story, people respond to the advantage it gives them. To build trust in each other and the global product manager, it comes from face-to-face interaction and sharing and showing expertise."

Sinclair's aim was to ensure the content of face to face workshops and other interactions was relevant and beneficial to their local role. These events were considered vital as, on an interpersonal level, Karen felt it was important to establish relationships between in-country managers to:
- facilitate best practice sharing; and
- to build trust in the group role so that they felt the community and group supported and added value to their work.

Subject matter experts from design and usability, research and technical have been invited into the community to provide expertise to support specific project work instigated by the community. Results have included:
- moving certain prompts in the voicemail menu structure delivered a 300 percent increase in voicemail revenue in two countries, leading to all countries adopting the approach;
- made life easier for Orange and the customer – sharing of double billing solutions whilst roaming, through community members has meant time and resources on implementation and huge savings to customer;
- the community has responded positively to having reliable performance indicators;
- countries are able to benchmark, the community members can identify examples of good practice and learn from others. In turn, they can implement improvements that have demonstrated increases in revenue, efficiency and customer satisfaction.

At Orange, the Voicemail case study is now the benchmark for this type of learning and Karen Sinclair is now one of the first recognized role models (experts) in the company, for collaboration and team development.