Let's Stop Guessing! Exploring the Attributes that Matter for Distributed Workers, Leaders, and Teams

Presenter: Laura Hambley, Ph.D., R. Psych.,
Coauthors: Christianne Varty, BA Hons. (Cand.), Tom O’Neill, Ph.D.

As technology advances and work becomes more global and mobile, the distributed workforce continues to grow. Employees are now capable of completing work away from a desk, teams can be dispersed across borders, and leaders frequently manage people they cannot see. This shift is driven by two factors. First, there is a growing demand for flexible work options enabling people to work away from the traditional office, such as telework, agile work, smarter work and remote work. Second, organizations are increasingly turning to teams dispersed across time, geography, and culture in order to leverage diverse expertise. Regardless of the specific cause, the reality is that organizations must be prepared to effectively transition employees to the new workplace.

From a people perspective there are benefits to developing an adaptable and agile organization. For example, employee benefits may include reduced commuting time, limited business travel, and freedom from the restrictions of a nine-to-five workday. Communities and cities benefit from reduced pressure on infrastructure and lessened travel at peak traffic times. Organizations also stand to gain, benefitting from real-estate cost savings, reducing their carbon footprint, increasing employee engagement and retention, and the ability to utilize expertise across geographical locations. Organizations, therefore, have a need and an incentive to ensure the shift to distributed work is smooth.

In fact, increasing attention in research and in practice has been focused on distributed work. In particular, attention is often concentrated on managing technology, ensuring adequate facilities such as home office space, and negotiating fair compensation packages. Unfortunately, focusing on these practical challenges often comes at the expense of considering the human elements of distributed work. For example, employees may express concerns about becoming isolated from coworkers, or may hesitate to take advantage of mobile working options for fear of being passed over for promotions. Leaders may resist managing people whom they cannot see and be unsure of how to assess performance from a distance. Finally, teams may experience frustration trying to coordinate work across offices and time zones, and may struggle to build trust with their distributed colleagues.

These challenges raise an important area for exploration—the impact of human attributes on distributed workers, leaders, and teams. When it comes to employees, Industrial/Organizational Psychology researchers at Work EvOHlution have identified a series of eleven key personality traits that predict distributed work success outcomes such as work engagement, job performance, and work-life balance. These traits include locus of control, which refers to an individual’s belief in their own ability to control situations at work; desire for novelty, which describes to an openness to new experiences, ideas, and approaches; and introversion, which captures being most comfortable working alone and not being energized by social situations. By assessing an employee’s unique combination of these personality traits, organizations and managers can gain awareness about how to effectively support individuals. Moreover, employees can proactively implement strategies to leverage their strengths and concentrate their energy on areas for development when working remotely.

When it comes to supporting and managing distributed employees, personality attributes and skills also play an important role. In a recent research project, Industrial/Organizational Psychologists interviewed 34 distributed leaders and surveyed an additional 200 distributed leaders to understand what it takes to lead from a distance. Their research revealed 14 key capabilities, each of which contains a series of related behaviours that leaders identified as critical to their effectiveness as managers of distributed employees. The researchers further sorted each of the capabilities into four categories—relationships, flexibility, productivity, and culture.

In addition to identifying the essential behavioural capabilities for distributed leadership success, the strength of this research was that it revealed twelve attributes and five skills that are necessary to successfully lead from a distance. These attributes include gratitude, which describes a leader’s
propensity to acknowledge and thank their employees, and industriousness, which refers to the individual’s tendency to focus on progress and accomplish work quickly and effectively. Among the identified skills were communication medium match, or the ability to choose the appropriate medium (e.g., phone call, email, or text) to meet the communication need, and distributed meeting management, which refers to a leader’s ability to facilitate effective and efficient meetings.

In fact, these personality attributes and distributed leadership skills predict success on the 14 behavioural capabilities, meaning that it is possible to measure and become aware of exactly where a leader is likely to succeed or need developmental support. This provides organizations with invaluable data and insight and can prevent dissatisfaction and frustration on the part of both the leader, and his/her employees.

Finally, distributed teams are made up of employees dispersed across locations, whether in the same city or across countries, and it’s important to assess their effectiveness and dynamics. The dynamics of teamwork can be especially complicated when factors such as distance, disjointed communication, cultural diversity, and technology challenges are added to the mix. Preparing teams for success involves examining communication and coordination processes, assessing collaboration and leadership, and understanding the influence of team climate factors such as trust and accountability. Although applicable to face-to-face teamwork, specific elements such as proactively sharing information, clearly outlining member roles, and focusing on results are especially important when workers are relying on electronic communication. Yet again, Industrial/Organizational Psychology research can be leveraged to diagnose distributed team effectiveness and debrief teams on the components for success.

Further, it is also useful to examine the personality make-up of distributed teams. For example, some teams share similar personality profiles. For these groups, it is necessary to maximize their strengths, but also critical to become aware of potential blind spots that could prevent the team from reaching its potential. Other teams have members with a diverse set of traits. In these cases, knowledge of others’ tendencies can help members to utilize each other’s strengths and support each other’s development. As well, the information can provide an important glimpse into areas for potential conflict. For instance, if some members are high on quick starting and easily get down to work, while others need a push to get started, the team can implement and agree on guidelines to prevent personality conflicts from developing.

In sum, research and practice have contributed valuable insight to the impact of human elements of distributed work. Understanding personality traits, skills, and behavioural capabilities in distributed workers, leaders, and teams is critical if organizations hope to not only adapt but also to thrive in the changing workplace. Moreover, assessing these human attributes provides organizations with a scientifically supported approach to managing the shift to distributed work and takes the guesswork out of the equation.