



Many companies invest heavily in virtual offices and working from home, spurred by studies that promise higher productivity, lower costs, and higher morale. While these are certainly possible outcomes, all too often there is a gap between expectations and reality as projects take longer than expected, costs rise, attrition grows, and HR costs increase.

Almost universally, the gaps between expectations and reality stem from being overly focused on the technology used to connect virtual teams, rather than the experiences of the human beings themselves. Working remotely requires a new set of rules and guidelines for communication and collaboration in the virtual environment.

By ignoring the human element, companies expose themselves to operational risk. By addressing it they minimize that risk and reap the benefits, and increase their abilities to achieve the promised gains in productivity, efficiency, and morale for long-term profitability and success.

In this case study, we will look at a major integrated bank and financial group with over \$230 billion in assets as its research and development team transitioned from virtual inefficiency and frustration to productivity and success.

## About the Client



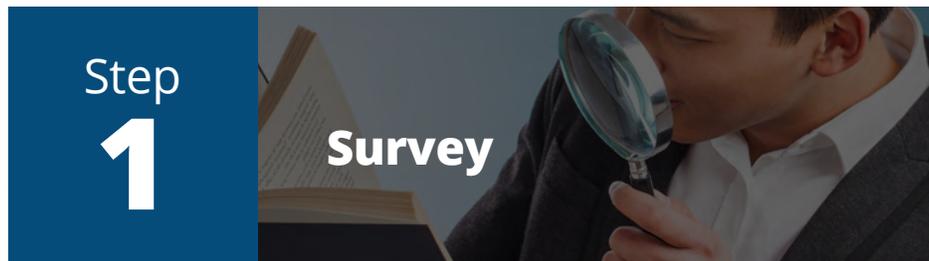
The client, a leading bank and integrated financial group, has more than 26,000 employees in knowledge-intensive positions. It has been recognized numerous times as a top employer and for its commitment to diversity, with securities listed on a major national stock exchange.

The virtual team in question is a research and development group spread across five different regions. The team members are extremely bright, articulate, and analytical, with strong personalities.

Challenges facing this virtual team included:

- project delays
- interpersonal conflict
- inefficient meetings
- management lacking knowledge of leadership in the virtual environment

The client engaged **Virtual Team Builders (VTB)** to perform a detailed performance survey of the challenges facing their team and to design a program that would provide managers and staff with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive.



VTB began with a performance survey and subsequent interviews to identify the challenges the team was facing.

The survey revealed a team that was smart, motivated, and eager to perform well. Managers and staff had most of the necessary ingredients to meet and even exceed expectations.

A detailed analysis of the results identified common themes, grouped into three categories:

- ▶ **Virtual Meetings.** Meetings often ran for 3.5 hours, far overtime, with high levels of distractability and conflict among team members, as well as a tendency to pursue unproductive tangents when discussing important topics. These issues resulted in feelings of frustration and disengagement, as well as missed objectives and costly project delays.
- ▶ **Interpersonal Communication.** Working remotely can cause feelings of isolation, weakening the bonds of trust between individual team members as well as between staff and management. With this client, an uncompromising approach to communication combined with low levels of trust lead to increased conflict, a negative attitude regarding most interactions, and abnormally high attrition and turnover.

These issues reduced efficiency and productivity, contributing to an overall atmosphere of frustration and low expectations.

- ▶ **Leadership in the Virtual Office.** The team leader had a proven track record of managing teams in a face-to-face environment but had no prior training or experience in virtual settings. As a result, despite being aware of the issues facing the team, the leader lacked the strategies to resolve them remotely and did not know how to proceed.

## Step 2

### Debrief, Training Design, & Sign-Off



VTB prepared a detailed report and held a virtual meeting to share their findings with the client's leadership. All data and responses were anonymized. The goals of the debrief meeting were to:

1. Review the assessment results
2. Summarize the interviews and priority areas
3. Provide recommendations

VTB presented a customized training and coaching plan, focused on addressing the three primary areas of opportunity identified in the assessment stage: Meetings, Communication, and Leadership.

The client had an opportunity to review and further customize the plan before signing off, confident that the solution they were to receive would successfully address their needs.



VTB's custom-designed training sessions for this client consisted of:

### Application Plans:

**Before the session:** Prior to the programs, the participants were asked to complete a pre-session assignment with the goal of getting participants to think about the content and formulate ideas about the topic in advance.

**During the Session:** Throughout the program, participants developed application plans to determine how they intended to implement their new knowledge and skills on the job.

**Post-Session Support Webinar:** At the end of the initial program, the client's team leaders, managers and members received individualized assignments to practice on the job. In this facilitated session, participants had opportunities to ask questions that arose in their practice and to share what worked and what did not work for them.

This session was a powerful tool to deepen each team member's knowledge and skills.

### Interactive VILT sessions

The training culminated in the creation of a Team Operating Agreement addressing the issues uncovered in the survey and discussed during our VILT training sessions. On the following page is an excerpt from their TOA.

## What Is a Team Operating Agreement (TOA)?



A TOA is a comprehensive document that establishes rules of engagement for team interactions. Effective TOAs are created by the team for the team, ensuring buy-in, and are typically modified over time as their team needs evolve.

### The team agreed to support the TOA:

*Creating consensus when finalizing your TOA items means supporting the TOA even though you may not fully agree with it. The process involves modifying and adapting it so that all team members can support it, with no member opposing it.*

Sample content from their TOA:

- Meeting agendas will be sent out via email 24 working hours prior to the status meeting and will include who is attending the meeting, the goal of the meeting, anticipated outcomes, and background summary.
- We commit to reading the supporting documents in advance of the meeting and coming ready to discuss.
- Once a communication has started we will not check our emails.
- After every agenda item we will pause to summarize key points, applicable action items, and associated timelines.
- Ten minutes prior to the end of the meeting, the chair will ensure that everyone has had an opportunity to voice their outstanding questions, concerns, or comments by asking people directly for their thoughts.
- Prior to the meeting, we will designate a Moderator/Timekeeper to monitor the timing and keep the meeting on track.
- We will support the facilitator in conducting a successful meeting by keeping comments to no more than three minutes and refrain from repeating what our colleagues have already said.



One month after the training program was initiated, VTB conducted a follow-up survey to debrief with the leader and the team to gauge the program's effectiveness. Results included:

### **Virtual Meetings**

*"My team is in a much better place. I feel more confident in my role and our virtual meetings are seamless." – Senior Manager*

The client reported a dramatic improvement in their virtual meetings. The meetings were more organized, more collegial, and had more focused and targeted discussions. The participants indicated that they now felt the meetings were a valuable use of their time.

### **Interpersonal Communication**

In and out of meetings, the team began to communicate more effectively, leading to a reduction in misunderstandings and an increase in trust.

Most importantly, the team saw a 25% reduction in attrition, indicating a much healthier work environment and greater cost savings.

Overall, team morale saw a marked improvement as staff put their virtual coaching and training into practice.

### **Leadership in the Virtual Office**

*"Training for the virtual environment literally transformed the dynamic of our team and gave us the skills we needed to work as a cohesive, coordinated virtual unit." – Team Leader*

The team leaders reported more confidence not only in leading virtual meetings, but in supporting the team between meetings. With a better understanding of how to lead in a virtual environment, they were more able to identify and manage challenges before they became problematic.

## Summary



The client demonstrated a genuine commitment to transform its research and development team. By investing in virtual solutions to support its workforce, it positioned itself in the best position to succeed.

The process provided staff with a clear roadmap and solid framework for leading, communicating, collaborating, and connecting without direct face-to-face contact. The result was a motivated, effective, and resilient research and development team that consistently met high standards for performance, productivity, and efficiency.

- ▶ To learn more about what **Virtual Team Builders** can do for your organization, take our [Free Virtual Team Performance Survey](#).