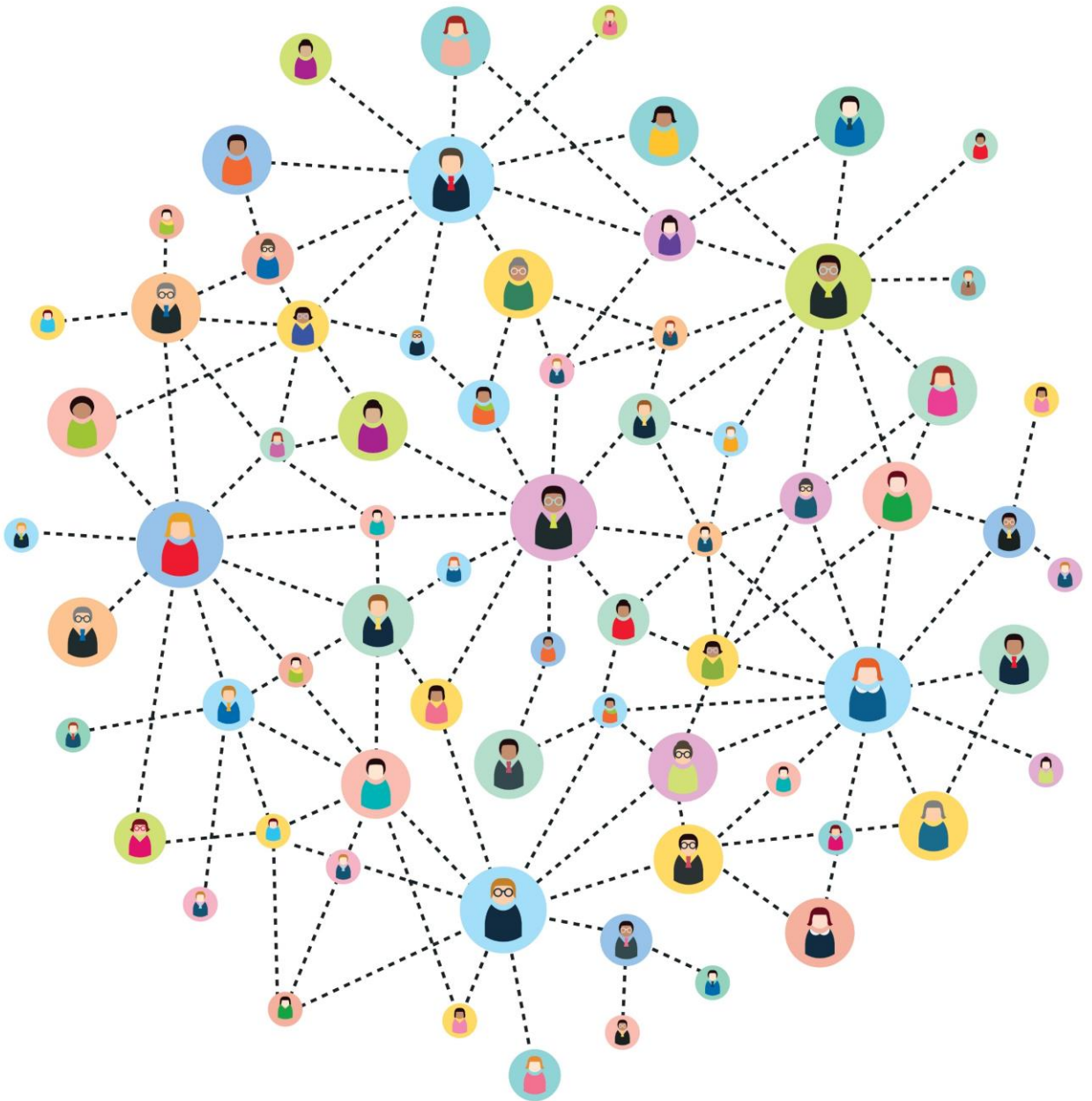


# Belbin® Report

## How to leverage the potential of virtual teams with Belbin



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**BELBIN®**

# How to leverage the potential of virtual teams with Belbin

Virtual teams carry a lot of potential. In deploying virtual teams, organizations can gather the best human capital for the job, wherever in the world their people may be.

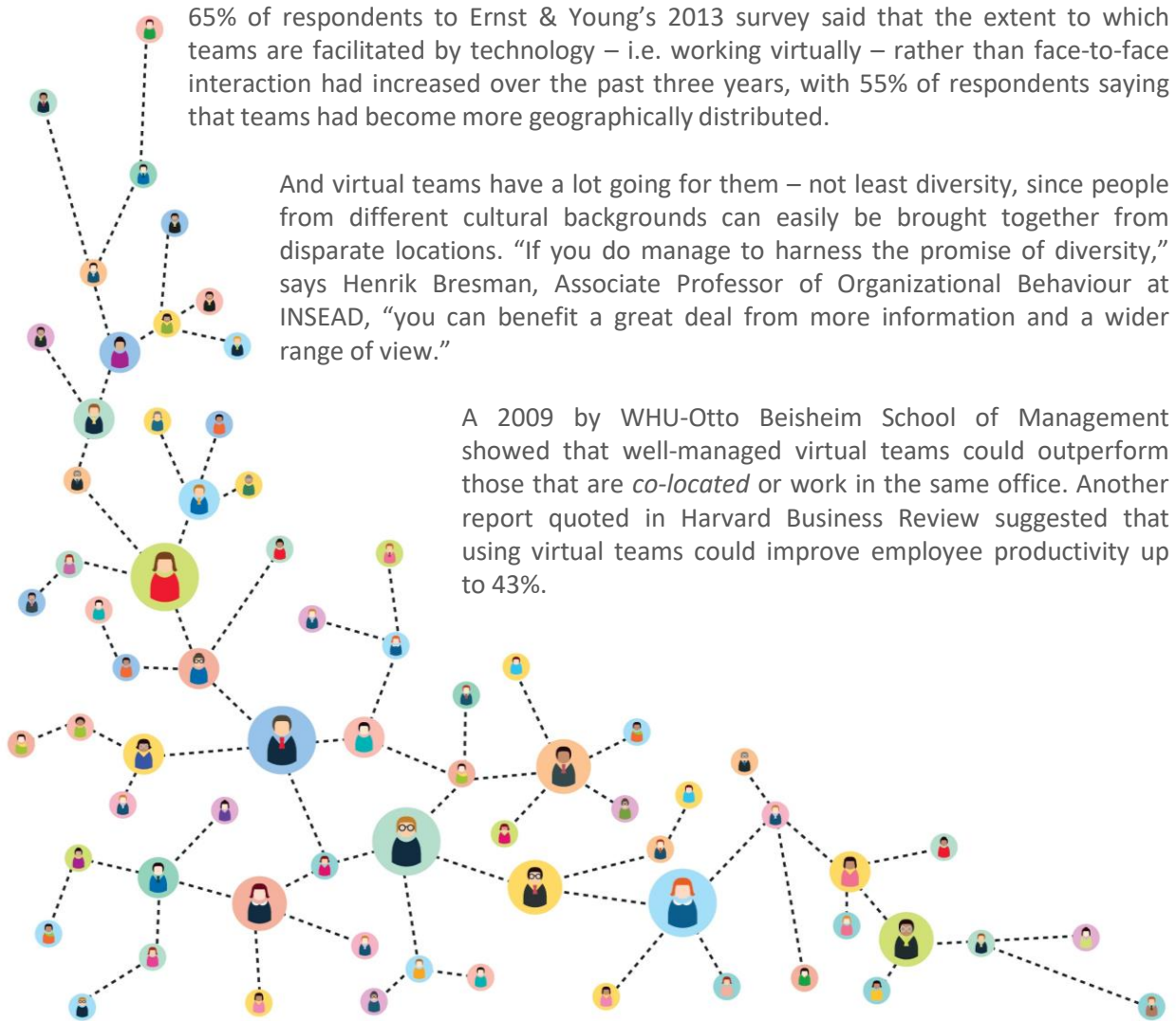
Companies can reduce running costs, whilst allowing employees to manage work/life balance more flexibly and interact with colleagues around the world. But there are a whole slew of potential problems to avoid – missed cues, cultural divides, failing technology and the risk of isolation, to name but a few.

## When they're good, they're very, very good...

65% of respondents to Ernst & Young's 2013 survey said that the extent to which teams are facilitated by technology – i.e. working virtually – rather than face-to-face interaction had increased over the past three years, with 55% of respondents saying that teams had become more geographically distributed.

And virtual teams have a lot going for them – not least diversity, since people from different cultural backgrounds can easily be brought together from disparate locations. "If you do manage to harness the promise of diversity," says Henrik Bresman, Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour at INSEAD, "you can benefit a great deal from more information and a wider range of view."

A 2009 study by WHU-Otto Beisheim School of Management showed that well-managed virtual teams could outperform those that are *co-located* or work in the same office. Another report quoted in Harvard Business Review suggested that using virtual teams could improve employee productivity up to 43%.



Years before technology made virtual teams commonplace, Dr Meredith Belbin was writing about how this kind of team might work successfully by identifying strengths.

*"The essence of a team is that its members form a co-operative association through a division of labour that best reflects the contribution that each can make towards the common objective. The members do not need to be present at the same place and at the same time to enable the team to function."*

– Dr Belbin, *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*, 1981

### But when they're bad...

It's not always good news. A 2005 Deloitte study of IT projects outsourced to virtual work groups found that 66% didn't deliver on the clients' requirements. And research has uncovered that people who work remotely can receive lower performance evaluations, smaller pay rises and fewer promotions. It turns out that, even if they're working just as hard remotely, leaders associate physical presence in the office with commitment and reliability, even if they were doing so unconsciously.

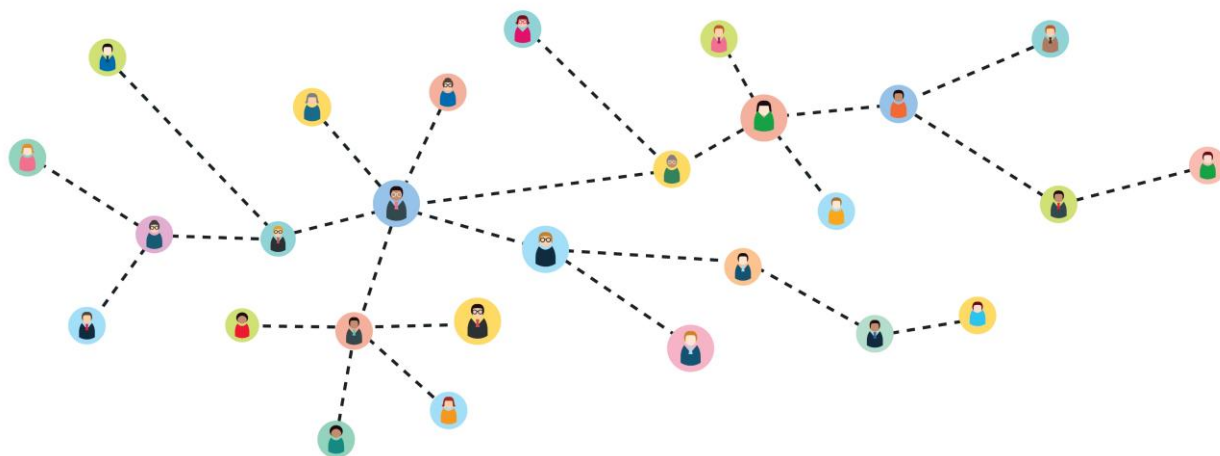
Sarah O'Connor, in the Financial Times, describes how "the economics of agglomeration" affects a company's bottom line. "When companies cluster physically together, they tend to be more productive." That's why productivity is 32% higher than the UK average in London, where companies can collaborate and compete more effectively, swapping staff and ideas within a stone's throw.

### So how do you harness the benefits of diversity and remote working, whilst imitating what co-located teams do best?

We're often asked whether – and how – Belbin theory applies to virtual teams, and how the language of Team Roles can help to overcome the pitfalls that prevent some virtual teams from succeeding. Here are our tips.

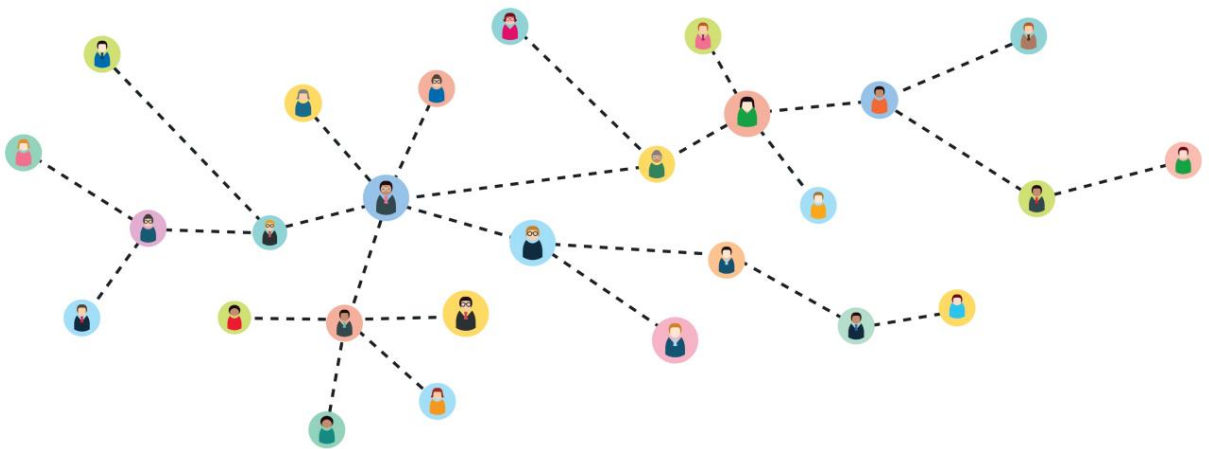
#### Choose your people carefully.

It's crucial to discover the strengths and weaknesses of each team member and consider the impact this may have on a virtual team in particular.



Belbin Team Roles are ways of behaving, relating to, and communicating with, others. Each Team Role behaviour consists of strengths (what that individual can offer to the team) and associated weaknesses (less desirable characteristics which are simply the flipside of the strength). If the virtual team is coming together for the first time, it's an ideal opportunity to discover each other's Team Roles. This can open up discussion as to what each person has to offer, who will do which kind of work, and which people might make good (complimentary) pairings.

"With the vast majority of companies acknowledging that teamwork is absolutely crucial to their competitive performance, it has become essential to get the chemistry right."



### Give some thought to size.

When teams get above four or five, people stop putting in the work, because they feel less responsible for the end result. Dr Meredith Belbin's ideal team size is four, so that each team member is accountable and no one person has the casting vote when making decisions. This means that decisions need to be made by persuasion and consensus. It's also important to break teams down into sub-teams when the numbers get too big. There's only so much one team can feasibly do, and adding more people is not always the answer.

### Clarify goals and guidelines.

In their study of high performance teams, Ernst & Young found that shared commitment, and building and sustaining a genuine desire to achieve a collective goal was even more important for teams that are geographically distributed, than for others. Not only this, but it's important to frame this collective vision in terms of team members' individual needs, so that each person knows how they fit into the whole.

When team members extrapolate issues from their locality, and assume these apply to the business as a whole, this can shift the team's priorities unduly and take them off track. And when people forget to 'think global', they assume others are on the same page and misunderstandings occur. Having an international language like Belbin, with no cultural affinity or bias can break down these kinds of barriers and offer a different kind of currency for exploring difference.

### Build trust.

In a virtual team, where it can take longer – and be more difficult – to figure out the 'lay of the land', it is crucial that a team culture is established where individuals feel able to speak up if they disagree or feel something is amiss, without fear of punishment or rejection – in effect, what Google defines as 'psychological safety'.

According to Harvard Business Review, in addition to encouraging team members to share their backgrounds and talk about their lives, leaders should ask people to share – with all team members – how they work best and what they hope to bring to the team. As well as overcoming the isolation that can result from remote working, this helps team members to build connections and understand who they can approach for different issues. This helps the team to work more efficiently and can avoid time being wasted by work being allocated to the wrong person.

The language of Belbin Team Roles can give new teams a shorthand to discuss their preferences and working styles, and to figure out how to allocate work most effectively according to strengths.

### Bring interaction into sharp focus.

Ernst & Young found that cross-border teams could be *more* sensitive to how colleagues are thinking and feeling than "in-person" teams, simply because they're more aware of the possibility for misunderstandings to occur. As a language that goes across cultures, Belbin Team Roles is a practical, everyday way to aid interactions and avoid misapprehensions.

A key takeaway from Ernst & Young's paper is the importance of taking differences into account, not just ignoring them. By flagging up differences, Belbin helps to celebrate diversity and raise awareness of individual differences, but it does so in a non-confrontational way. For example, after hearing an idea from a creative team member, another might want to evaluate that idea, casting doubt on its viability.

In Belbin terms, this creative individual is a **Plant**; the one analysing the idea, a **Monitor Evaluator**. It is the **Monitor Evaluator's** job to examine an idea from every possible angle to ensure that it will work. But, if perceived merely as negativity, this process can offend the **Plant**. If presented in Team Role language, it can be more easily understood as part of the process of working an idea through to the finished article. This prevents the focus being placed on the individual (and the quality of their idea) as a personal reflection on them.

## Encourage honesty and have someone speak out when things are being left unsaid.

It's vital that team members are honest with one another, and that this honesty is active, not passive. Harvard Business Review introduce the concept of "observable candour" and even go so far as to suggest an "official advocate for candour" in each virtual team meeting, picking up when something is being left unsaid, and calling out criticism that isn't constructive.

Once the team has been working together for a certain amount of time, [Belbin Observer Assessments](#) (or 360-degree feedback) can provide opportunities to show how well an individual is projecting their strengths and preferences. If there are negative elements to behaviour which are adversely affecting the team, these can be brought into the open in a non-confrontational way, so that they can be mitigated. Whilst not all problems within the team can be framed in Team Role terms, it's a good place to begin breaking down conflicts and examining the kinds of differences which can cause friction between individuals.

## Use Team Roles to help your people adapt to virtual working.

Like co-located teams, virtual teams need a balance of Team Roles in order to succeed. The exact combination required – and when they should be added to the mix – will vary depending on what the team is required to do. But it is important to remember that virtual teamworking may come more easily to some than to others, and that some Team Role contributions rely more heavily on visual cues which may be absent in virtual teamworking.

**Plants & Specialists** may relish the freedom and independence remote working offers, but they may need close monitoring to ensure that they remain in line with the team's objectives, as they may become distracted by ideas or other subjects of interest, respectively.

**Monitor Evaluator**, **Shaper** & **Completer Finisher** behaviours are perhaps the most likely to be misconstrued in virtual teams, for different reasons. **Monitor Evaluators** may be seen as uncommunicative or overly negative; **Shapers**, too harsh, and **Completer Finishers**, splitting hairs. Different cultural expectations have the potential to magnify these difficulties, so it is vital that the importance of these contributions is reiterated when these roles come into play.

**Resource Investigators** & **Teamworkers** might find that they need to adapt their communication style to relate to others within and outside the team. **Teamworkers** might be required to bridge cultural gaps, whilst **Resource Investigators** may find that they need to listen more (rather than talk) on group calls, to ensure that everyone is given 'airtime'.

**Co-ordinators** & **Implementers** are responsible for the organisation of people and tasks, respectively. **Implementers** will face organizational changes on a logistical level – ensuring that plans are clear and concise, with no room for ambiguity across time-zones. According to Harvard Business Review, virtual teams work best with a 'monitor and mentor' approach to leadership, which fits most closely with the **Co-ordinator** role. It is also stipulated that sharing and rotating power in a virtual team engenders trust, so it may fall to the **Co-ordinator** to identify the best person to lead the team at any given stage, and to ensure that this process takes place.



## Observe the touchpoints.

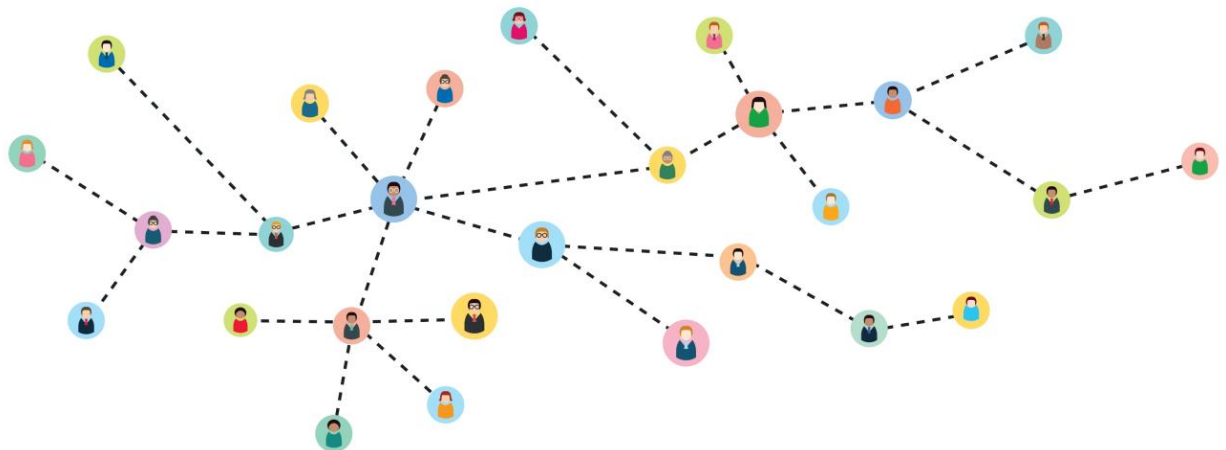
It is best, say experts, that virtual team members meet face-to-face at key points during the team's life cycle: at the beginning; when introducing a new team members, and when important milestones are reached. Bringing people together at these crucial points can help build trust, clarify goals, set expectations and maintain engagement levels.

In Ernst & Young's study, 72.1% saw regular face-to-face meetings as the most valuable way in which teams interact: "Spending time – and budget – on face-to-face meetings and investing in how people interact and understand how others work, is as important as the content of the meeting."

If meeting in person is impossible – and economic constraints sometimes prohibit business travel – visual technologies are preferable as a substitute, offering the opportunity to read body language and other cues which can nuance intonation. These meetings are useful for assessing team dynamics and introducing pairings with different strengths, whose complementarity might make them an effective working duo.

**Whatever your virtual team is set up to do, Belbin offers a shared understanding of behavioural styles and a common language. This can bridge cultural divides and help to mitigate the loss of physical and social cues that virtual working often entails.**

**Whether your team is virtual or co-located, begin your Belbin journey today at**



## About the author

Victoria Bird is the Head of Research & Development at Belbin. After graduating from the University of Cambridge, Victoria joined the Belbin team in 2006. She is passionate about delivering the data, insights and analysis which help spread the Belbin message to individuals and teams worldwide.

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