Group projects can be challenging in the best of times as this humorous, student-drawn chart indicates. And there are additional challenges associated with doing group projects virtually. With the emphasis on group work increasing across universities and into the workplace, it is becoming critical for students to be able to operate effectively in virtual teams.

The good news is, virtual teaming skills will assist you in becoming work-ready, with the future of work increasingly involving remote teamwork. And thankfully, there’s a lot of resources and research to help guide you in becoming effective virtual team members.

Here’s some solid, evidence-backed tips to help students work effectively in virtual teams.
Tip #1: Don’t forget the basics

There are some basics about teamwork that hold regardless of whether you are working face-to-face or virtually.

Research from Ohland and colleagues (2012) establishes that being a great team member involves demonstrating five key kinds of behaviours:

1) Contributing to the team’s work (e.g., Did I do more or higher-quality work than expected?).

2) Interacting with teammates (e.g., Did I ask for and show an interest in teammates’ ideas and contributions?)

3) Keeping the team on track (e.g., Did I make sure that teammates were making appropriate progress?).

4) Expecting quality (e.g., Did I motivate the team to do excellent work?)

5) Having relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities (e.g., Did I acquire new knowledge or skills to improve the team’s performance?)

Whether you’re working virtually or face-to-face, doing these five sets of behaviours will increase your team’s performance and earn your teammates’ respect.
Tip #2: Intentionally learn about teammates up front.

In order to work effectively in teams, everybody needs to understand the other member's styles and capabilities (Huckman, Staats, & Upton, 2009). This allows the team to:

a) interact in enjoyable and productive ways, and
b) figure out who should do what.

While getting to know each other may happen relatively naturally in face-to-face contexts, that isn’t the case with virtual teams. So, you need to make time when the team first forms to have an intentional conversation about teammate's expectations, personalities, work styles, and strengths.

Tip #3: Relationships take extra time and effort to build

Virtual teams often spend too little time engaging in the types of social conversations that happen naturally when teams are face-to-face. This can hinder the development of strong team relationships.

Simple acts like connecting through LinkedIn/Facebook/WeChat, sending a birthday note, and recognising contributions can help build relationships and team cohesion. Regular video calls, particularly when done over meals, can also facilitate relationships. This can take the form of a virtual “coffee catch-up” or virtual team meal at regular intervals.

Tip #4: Create more structure, not less

Face-to-face interactions allow coordination, consensus, and commitment to happen more naturally. Accomplishing these tasks virtually can be trickier. In particular, lack of accountability and free riding can be a big problem in virtual teams (Alnuaimi and colleagues, 2010, Furumo, 2009). So, those working in virtual teams need to be more structured and proactive than those in face-to-face teams. Ways to create effective structure include:

- **Initiating discussion** of what an excellent outcome would look like.
- **Defining and communicating roles** to prevent diffusion of responsibility.
- **Scheduling** who will do what by when, and then adding it to a calendar with built-in reminders.

Tip #5: Slow down to speed up

When communicating virtually, it is easier to misunderstand each other. This is especially true if you’re using communication technology that doesn’t allow people to see each other’s’ faces, like email (Byron, 2008). So, more effort needs to go into making sure everybody is on the same page. For example, the use of paraphrasing can help team members check their understanding of what is being communicated.
Tip #6: Click the “share video” button

Video technology allows leaders and teammates to pick up on non-verbal cues such as when a member is trying to have input or agreeing/disagreeing with what is being said. And many people feel anxious that others aren’t listening or disagree if they don’t get non-verbal encouragement. So, several experts recommend having a rule that everybody should share their videos.

Tip #7: Unmute the distractions

For small team calls, encouraging team members not to mute calls fosters a more natural flow of conversation. Unmuting calls also allows for jokes and shared laughter which fosters team morale and cohesion. Some background noise (e.g. a barking dog) can be a reminder that people, not machines, are on the line. Of course, in big teams (10 people or more), muting becomes necessary.

Tip #8: Use different decision-making technologies for generating ideas, rating options, and gaining commitment.

When making decisions in virtual teams, a common mistake is using only one technology – either email or videoconferencing – for all of the steps of making a decision. But good decision making has several steps, with different software applications suited for different steps.

For instance, when brainstorming different ideas, the research suggests that it is best to generate ideas independently (Gallupe et al, 1992) using software like Stormboard. Then, once many ideas have been generated, the next best practice is to independently and anonymously rank all the options using something like ADoodle. Finally, to gain consensus and commitment, you need a videoconference to interactively discuss the options and gain consensus and commitment. There’s different free software available for each of these steps. Whatever you do, don’t just rely on email, which has many limitations as a collaboration and decision-making technology.

Tip #9: Start early and don’t procrastinate

When under time pressure, teams often devolve into cycles of conflict, distrust, and disrespect and end up cutting corners and making mistakes (Maruping and colleagues, 2015; Perlow, 1999). So, if you want to perform well and have a nice team experience, you should start early, stay on track, and avoid procrastination.

Virtual teaming affords an opportunity to work on group projects from the convenience of one’s home. However, virtual teaming also comes with unique set of challenges. Students in virtual teams can use the above tips to create great assignments and have an enjoyable team experience.
**Tip #10: Choose and learn the tech**

Take some time to investigate and choose a collaboration technology - e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack, Confluence, Google’s Office Suite - that suits your needs.

When doing so, consider whether the software app is supported by your University’s IT team. For example, [UNSW’s IT Services](https://www.unsw.edu.au/services) supports the use of Microsoft Teams (which integrates the Microsoft Office suite with video-conferencing software), which means they have [helpful tutorials](https://www.unsw.edu.au/services) and can help you troubleshoot using Teams. Whichever collaboration technologies you ultimately use, take time prior to the first meeting to play around with the technology and explore its features. That way, you know what it can (and cannot) do and can troubleshoot any issues in advance. This prep work may make you the hero of the team and will minimise technologically induced stress.

**References:**


