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## ***GUEST COLUMN – Virtual or Vagabond?***

***By Kris Girrell, Senior Partner, Camden Consulting Group***

As I stuff the Tupperware salad bowl into the back seat after finishing the fourth mobile lunch in as many days, the thought barged into my mind that someone forgot to tell me that the working world has changed.

Gone were the cafeteria discussions of key clients. Gone too were the days in my office where I could catch up on my expense report. Typing this out on my ultra light portable in the local wireless-enabled coffee shop is probably going to be the closest I get to any office this week.

So, I've become one of the burgeoning number of virtual employees — the real question is: How do I manage?

### **Being There (Virtually)**

The first hurdle any virtual employee or manager needs to address is connectivity — not the IT pseudo-hard-wired state of being plugged into our email — but creating a real sense of presence at work. This presence, and the subsequent teamwork, is vital in any organizational structure.

All employees, virtual or not, stay with their employer because they get what they like from the organization, and the company likes what the employee brings.

Job One of any employment arrangement is to actually show up as a member and take care of the slew of roles and responsibilities that go along with the job. Of course, doing so is not always easy for any employee, let alone a virtual one.

It helps to establish a set of ground rules. Certainly you should establish your own, but here are a few that ought to be on the list:

**Communication** — The frequency and level of personal communication has actually diminished in the workplace with the increased use of Blackberries and email. But IM's are no substitute for talking with your boss or colleagues. In truth, more communication problems arise out of wrongly interpreted inflection and meaning of typed words or the inadvertent caps lock "scream" than are ever solved by the content therein.

Establishing a routine of regular (however short) phone calls and in-person conversations with your key constituents will go great distances in bridging the communication and misinterpretation gap.

**Meetings** — Just because you are on the road or located in an office somewhere in East Youcantgettherefromhere, that's no excuse for not making the regular staff

meeting. However, being a virtual team member is a great excuse to clean up your meeting protocol. Whether you are a participant or driver of the meeting, make certain that a briefing takes place before the meeting by sending out information and having a published agenda with a clear and singular purpose. Shoot for shorter, even if more frequent, meetings with a focused purpose. For some good guidance on the topic, read Patrick Lencioni's "Death By Meeting." Bottom line: be there or be square!

**Deadlines, Follow-up, and Accountability** — Ah, there's the rub! How do you ensure others' accountability if you aren't there to inspect every step of the process? Being virtual does have its downside. Going virtual requires an extra level of detail than if working on-site, but it is possible.

Dates, milestones, expectations (what does "done" look like?) and timelines must all be clearly spelled out and uniformly shared among virtual team members. Take a project management approach to your work even if you're a consultant or field salesperson.

### **Out of Sight; Out of Mind**

The other downside of virtual employment is that you are virtually invisible (unless you really mess up!). Certainly, you'll be called on the carpet for mistakes, but assuming going virtual leads to gains in productivity, it is important to broadcast and inform the company about your progress and successes.

Staying visible is not a matter of tooting horns. Rather, it is recognizing the imperative of the corporate body: each hand actually does need to know what the other is doing. Whether you're the manager or the managed, both own the responsibility for this connectivity.

### **Rules for the Wireless Warrior**

Here are some practical tips for virtual viability:

- While it is actually possible to eat lunch, drive and talk on the phone with the assistance of a headset, text messaging might put you over the top of the safety barrier. I recommend a limit of two simultaneous functions (your choice).
- Working from home is enhanced with the addition of an office door and some boundary rules. Most of them deal with multitasking (see above driving limitation). Set boundaries and clearly communicate them (for work and home life). One suggestion: Know when to stop working!
- And finally (I shudder to think this must be mentioned), please do me a personal favor, and don't answer the phone in the restroom!

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