

# Teamworking

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## In this factsheet

- [What is teamworking?](#)
- [Building effective teams](#)
- [Team role theories and team selection](#)
- [Team leadership, training and reward](#)
- [CIPD viewpoint](#)
- [References](#)
- [Further reading](#)

## What is teamworking?

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### Defining teamworking

Teamworking may be defined as a work practice based on the use of teams, or groups of limited numbers of people, who have shared objectives at work and who co-operate, on a permanent or temporary basis, to achieve those objectives in a way that allows each individual to make a distinctive contribution.

### Background

In recent decades, teamworking has grown in importance. Previously, roles at work were often well-defined; in the traditional office or factory, for example, there was usually a strict division of responsibilities and most job titles conveyed exactly which duties people would be expected to undertake. But with advances in technology and education, employers began to place a growing emphasis on versatility, leading to an increasing interest in teamworking at all levels. The gradual replacement of traditional hierarchical forms with flatter organisational structures, in which employees are expected to fill a variety of roles, has similarly played a part in the rise of the team.

More recently, too, a focus on 'high-performance' or 'high-commitment' work practices has played a part in fostering the use of teamworking. The 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS)<sup>1</sup> found teamworking to be the most commonly used work practice among a group of identified 'high-performance' practices, with almost three-quarters of workplaces deploying at least some core employees in formally-designated teams.

## Types of team

There are many types of teams. What follows<sup>2</sup> is not a comprehensive list, and there are other definitions and classifications, while some teams may fit into more than one category.

- **Production and service teams** – examples are in production, construction, sales and health care. They have a relatively long life-span, providing an ongoing product or service to customers or users of the organisation.
- **Project and development teams** – including research and product development teams. Dedicated to a particular objective, they have limited life-spans and a clear set of short-term objectives. They are often cross-functional, with members selected for the contribution their expertise can make.
- **Advice and involvement teams** – with the aim of improving, for example, working conditions or quality. Members will not devote a great deal of time to them and, once they have achieved their objectives, they should be disbanded.
- **Crews** – such as airline crews, which may be formed from members who have rarely worked together but through prior training clearly understand their respective roles.
- **Action and negotiation teams** – such as surgical and legal teams, these consist of people who tend to work together regularly. They have well-developed processes and clear objectives.
- **Virtual teams** – whose members work in separate buildings and may even be in different countries. They may need to communicate by telephone, email and tele- or video-conferencing rather than face-to-face. Managing such teams can be particularly difficult, not least because remote working can exacerbate misunderstandings. Where some members of the remote teams are located overseas (for example, with the offshoring of certain 'back-office' roles), additional challenges may arise with issues such as time differences when planning communications.
- **Self-managed teams** – where much decision-making is devolved from line managers to team members. Such teams may also be known as semi-autonomous or fully autonomous teams, according to the degree of self-management.

In general, teams will consist of people employed by the same organisation, although sometimes there may be teams from different employers: examples are design project teams in construction, which bring together architects and engineers from different firms, or teams that include customers or suppliers.

Teams can include senior and junior employees (for the latter, team membership may also be a development opportunity) and someone relatively junior may be a team leader.

Most commentators suggest that between five and eight people is the ideal size for teams. Teams need to be large enough to incorporate the appropriate range of expertise and representation of interests, but not so large that team-members' participation, and hence their interest, is limited.

## Benefits of teamworking

Organisations use teamworking for many reasons, including the desire to achieve the following objectives:

- improve productivity
- enhance quality of products or services
- improve customer focus
- speed the spread of ideas
- respond to opportunities and threats and to fast-changing environments
- increase employee motivation
- introduce multi-skilling and employee flexibility.

There can be benefits for employees too. The most commonly-quoted positive outcomes are greater job satisfaction and motivation together with improved learning.

## Building effective teams

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### Stages of team development

Woodcock's seminal theory about team functioning proposes that, when a group of people come together to achieve an objective, they go through a series of stages leading to a final 'mature' stage that equates to an effective team<sup>3</sup>.

The main stages are:

- **Forming** – or undeveloped, when people are working as individuals rather than a team.
- **Storming** – the team becomes more aggressive, both internally and in relation to outside groups, rules and requirements.
- **Norming** – or consolidating, in which the team is beginning to achieve its potential, effectively applying the resources it has to the tasks it has, using a process it has developed itself.
- **Performing** – when the team is characterised by openness and flexibility. It challenges itself constantly but without emotionally charged conflict, and places a high priority on the development of other team members.

- **Mourning** – when the team disbands.

While this is a useful theoretical model, it should not be seen as unvarying. For example, a team in which the members know each other well may perform effectively almost from the start.

## Characteristics of effective teams

An effective team has the following characteristics:

- a common sense of purpose
- a clear understanding of the team's objectives
- resources to achieve those objectives
- mutual respect among team members, both as individuals and for the contribution each makes to the team's performance
- valuing members' strengths and respecting their weaknesses
- mutual trust
- willingness to share knowledge and expertise
- willingness to speak openly
- a range of skills among team members to deal effectively with all its tasks
- a range of personal styles for the various roles needed to carry out the team's tasks.

## Team role theories and team selection

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Two central requirements for team membership may be identified:

- the team should include a range of the necessary technical and specialist skills
- there should be a variety of personal styles among members to fill the different roles that are involved in successful teamwork.

## Team roles

The well-known expert in the field of teamworking, Dr Meredith Belbin, undertook pioneering work on team roles or types during the 1970s and has continued to progress his work in this area in successive decades<sup>4</sup>. Belbin has developed and slightly amended his description of team roles over the years and in his later work lists nine roles<sup>5</sup>:

- **Plant** – creative, imaginative, unorthodox. Solves difficult problems.

- **Resource investigator** – extrovert, enthusiastic, exploratory. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts.
- **Co-ordinator** – mature, confident, a good chairperson. Clarifies goals, promotes decision making.
- **Shaper** – dynamic, challenging. Has drive and courage to overcome obstacles.
- **Monitor evaluator** – sober, strategic, discerning. Sees all options.
- **Teamworker** – co-operative, mild, perceptive, diplomatic. Listens, builds, averts friction.
- **Implementer** – disciplined, reliable, conservative. Turns ideas into practical action.
- **Completer** – painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions, delivers on time.
- **Specialist** – single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skill that may be in short supply.

Belbin's work has been criticised on the grounds that individuals rarely fit neatly into these categories – most fit into more than one category while, arguably, the best team workers will adapt their behaviour to fill different roles as circumstances require. However, an awareness that an individual team member tends to fit a certain profile may have value in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of that individual and other team members.

Subsequent investigations by the academics Margerison and McCann confirm the need identified by Belbin for complementary skills within a team, leading to their development of the concept of a 'team management wheel'<sup>6</sup>. The Margerison-McCann work stresses the need for individual development as an essential first step to team development, with both of these aspects placed firmly in the context of clear business objectives, and highlights the key role for a 'linker' at the centre of the team management wheel model.

## Selecting team members

There are many other psychological tests and criteria that result in different team type classifications. Organisations may wish to look at a sample of tests to consider which might be most appropriate if they intend to use them to select team members and, especially, team leaders.

However, simply looking at previous behaviours in earlier teams, asking former team leaders and/or considering appraisal records may not be enough to select team members. Team selection is not an exact science and instinct may also come into play. A mix of types is necessary, as is a mix of skills – for example, selecting a team of IT specialists to look at an IT project might be ill-advised (although it happens), as users of the system should be included in the team. In this way, teamworking may also help people work across departmental boundaries or break down defined silos.

## Teamworking across departments

It is often helpful when managing change to ensure that teams from different departments are able to work effectively together towards shared objectives. For example, research on organisation development (OD) suggests that one example of a practical OD 'intervention' would be getting the HR team working with the Business Planning team to develop a performance management system that properly aligns individual and organisational goals. For more information on OD, see our factsheet on that topic.

- [Go to our factsheet on Organisation development](#)

## **Team leadership, training and reward**

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### **Leading teams**

Leadership is vital for successful teams, although there is no one recipe for successful team leadership. Like other team members, team leaders have their own personal styles.

Whatever their individual style, all leaders should:

- listen to team members
- question them to understand their points of view
- be responsive to feedback.

In some circumstances, leadership may rotate; for example, different individuals may take the lead at different stages of a project for which a team is responsible. Some semi-autonomous or fully autonomous teams appoint their own leaders, although this is rare in practice, with the arrangement found in only 6% of workplaces, according to the 2004 WERS.

More information on leadership issues in general can be found in our factsheet on that topic.

- [Go to our factsheet on Leadership](#)

### **Team training and learning**

Training on team building is often necessary to assist the move from working in a traditional hierarchy to being part of a team, as well as in circumstances where team members have not worked together previously and may not even know each other. This may consist of exercises carried out jointly under a facilitator, to enable people to get to know each other and to work together, understanding each member's strengths and weaknesses. Such exercises sometimes take place outdoors, although particular care needs to be taken in addressing health and safety and access issues in these circumstances. Social events may also be used to get team members to know each other.

Communications, knowledge-sharing and problem-solving may often be on the agenda, but the areas covered will depend on the nature and role of the team. Separate training may additionally need to take place for team leaders.

## Rewarding teams

Traditional appraisal systems are sometimes criticised for giving insufficient weight to individuals' contributions to teams and, it is argued, they may even hinder teamworking (for example, if an individual refrains from knowledge-sharing in order to be reflected in a better light than colleagues).

However, many employers are taking steps to counter such problems. Some organisations have introduced team pay systems aimed at encouraging group endeavour rather than individual performance (although this remains a minority pursuit). CIPD research has found that such schemes are less important for success than management style, culture and the working environment. If team pay is to be introduced, it should be done with great care and the complementary impact of non-financial reward should always be acknowledged.

Another approach adopted by many employers is to include teamworking as a specific issue that is assessed as part of individual performance appraisals.

## CIPD viewpoint

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Teams come in many forms and exist for many purposes. But not all teams succeed. Inadequate terms of reference, resources or training, poor selection of team members, the wrong mix of personality types or skills and poor leadership are among the reasons why teams may fail. It is important for the operation of teamworking to be effectively managed to address such potential shortcomings. Teamworking is desirable in many circumstances and, properly managed, can contribute to improved organisational performance while helping to empower individuals and improve job satisfaction and engagement.

## References

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2. Based, with some additions, on a typology in WEST, M.A. (2004) *The secrets of successful team management*. London: Duncan Baird.
3. WOODCOCK, M. (1989) *Team development manual*. 2nd ed. Aldershot: Gower.
4. BELBIN, R.M. (2004) *Management teams: why they succeed or fail*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
5. BELBIN, R.M. (1993) *Team roles at work*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

6. More information can be found on the TMS Development International website <http://www.tmsdi.com/>

## Further reading

### Books and reports

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This factsheet was updated by Janet Egan, researcher and writer on employment and reward issues.