

Project Managing Finance Transformation: Challenges and Solutions for a Virtual World

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We are currently experiencing what appears to be a long-term shift towards virtual working. This means that many managers tasked with the delivery of major finance transformation projects may need to rethink their approach. In other words, if the virtual team has become a permanent fixture, what needs to change to ensure your management techniques, processes and tools remain fit for purpose?

Here's a closer look at what has changed, at the challenges it raises, and at how to adapt your approach to ensure successful project delivery.





Finance Transformation

Realising that the working environment has turned virtual - and is likely to stay that way

In response to the first lockdown in the Spring of 2020, working from home (WFH) happened virtually overnight. At that stage, managers would have been forgiven for thinking that this was little more than a temporary workaround. Employees would stay at home until the government green light came through for a return to the office. After that, it would be a case of back to normal (or so many people thought).

Two things happened to scupper those assumptions. Most obviously, the restrictions have persisted longer than many anticipated. Secondly, on the whole, organisations and their employees have adapted surprisingly well to new modes of working.

Many are in no rush to revert back to the strict 9-5 office-based model. A survey of the UK's

Institute of Directors suggested that 74% of businesses intend to maintain elements of WFH in one form or other after the pandemic. A large majority of employees themselves would prefer to remain home-based for at least some of the time. In many organisations, the long term model may involve a blended or hybrid approach, with members of staff coming and going between office and home throughout the week.

If virtual team working was only going to be with us for a short period, there would be little point in overhauling your processes to accommodate it. However, it's now clear that we're dealing not with a temporary phenomenon, but with a longer-term shift. As such, it calls for a fundamental review of your project management practices, to ensure they are matched to this new virtual environment.

The rise of the networked organisation

From product scoping and selection, data architecture and migration, governance and management, through to user training and troubleshooting, a finance transformation project will typically require multiple specialist capabilities.

These days especially, project managers are faced with a dilemma. Skimping on expertise will jeopardise the success of the entire project. However, given the budget restraints currently faced by many organisations, there may be very limited scope to commit to expensive permanent staffing resources.

In response to this, alongside the emergence of a virtual environment, project managers are increasingly likely to be operating within a 'networked' organisational structure. This can consist of an often complex mix of in-house employees, outsourced and contracted services and resources.

The Challenges

Here are some of the key challenges that can arise when seeking to deliver a finance transformation project within a virtual, networked team structure:

Culture

Culture is less about what you do, and much more about how you actually go about getting things done.

To get to know about an organisation's approach to project work, considering workflows, progress reports and procedure manuals will only scratch the surface. It's often the watercooler moments, the informal meetings and one-to-one interactions that are most revealing.

But once a team is dispersed, much of this is likely to be lost. Face-to-face meetings, brainstorming sessions and general conversations that are often a key part of any organisation's culture are difficult to replicate online. People's behaviour changes, which can create a barrier to getting things done.

For contractors and other non-permanent team members, there are additional challenges. New starters can learn a lot about an organisation's priorities, preferences and attitudes to risk by visiting the office and speaking face-to-face with insiders. If all interactions are virtual, it is much to gain a feel for that organisation's culture and to win the trust of other team members.





Communication

Has this person actually understood what's expected of them? Is everyone on board with our methodology? Are we really going to have this task completed by the deadline?

Where meetings are virtual, nuances in conversation can be missed and is harder to pick up on the non-verbal clues that indicate puzzlement, concern or disagreement. There is greater scope for instructions to be lost in translation and for misunderstandings to arise.

Distractions

On the whole, individuals have grown comfortable with virtual working. They appreciate the ability to ditch the commute, as well as the increased flexibility to balance their home and work commitments.

But not all team members will respond to it in the same way. For some, performance levels may drop off. They may struggle with distractions and fail to meet deadlines.

Knowledge

This is a problem that can arise when bringing on board new consultants or contractors as part of your network. A new starter may be an expert in the field of data migration, but how well do they understand your sector? Just how familiar are they with the type of processes you have in place already, and the regulatory framework you operate under?

If all contact is virtual, it can be harder for new starters to get a sense of what you are trying to achieve and to familiarise themselves with your processes.

Security and confidentiality

Any financial transformation project usually necessitates looking 'under the bonnet' of the entire business. Team members are likely to have exposure to some of your organisation's most sensitive and potentially valuable data.

Even with just a small in-house team, it's important to maintain appropriate information flows in order to keep sensitive data secure. When that team is scattered, perhaps with various third-party contractors coming and going, this can be a good deal harder. You need to strike a balance between supplying team members with the access they require in order to perform their tasks, while still maintaining a secure fence around information that should not be divulged.





The solutions

A clear remit, goals

For each team member, you should be clear on:

- The tasks they have been assigned
- What tools they will require to carry out these tasks
- What data and information they will need in order to carry out these tasks
- Who they will need to liaise with
- Delivery deadlines

This should help you draw up a clear brief for individual team members so they can visualise exactly what's expected of them. In the context of security, it should also allow you to set appropriate access controls.

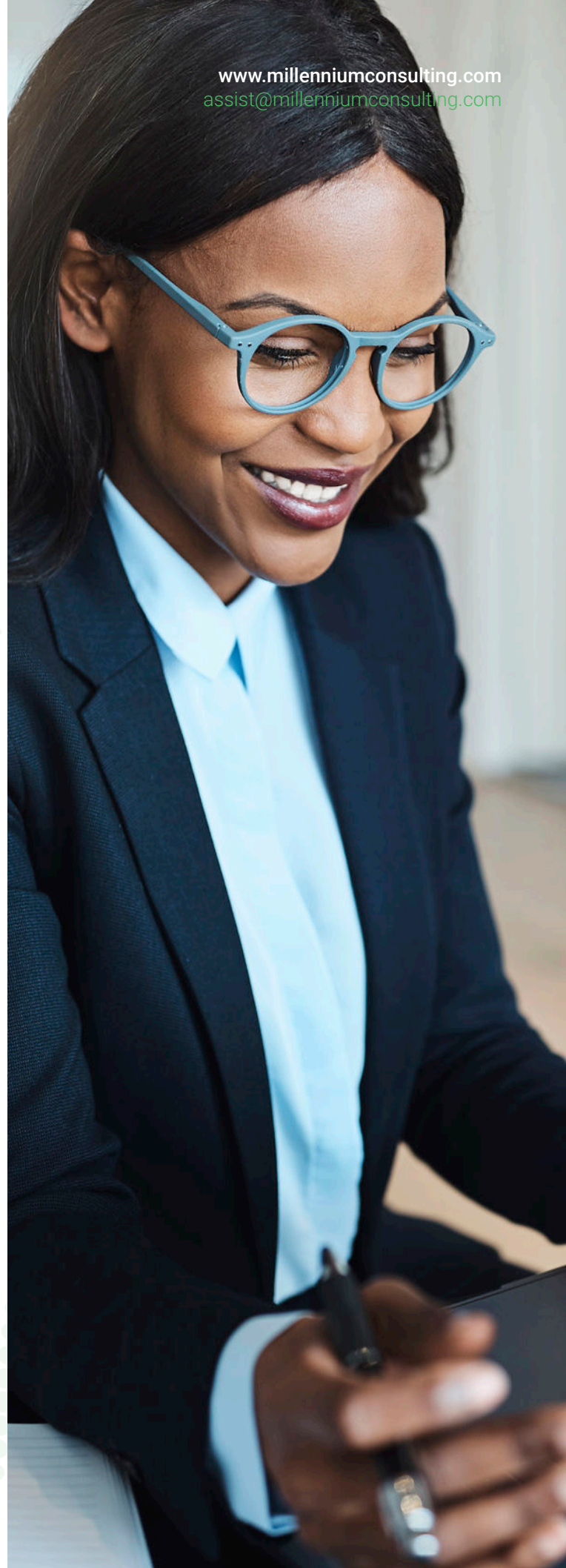
Set communication benchmarks

You need to reach a balance between allowing flexibility and team member autonomy on the one hand, against efficient workflows on the other.

Establish clear communication windows: i.e. set periods when everyone should be online and available to communicate. Also, provide response benchmarks: for instance, stipulating that all requests or questions must be acknowledged the same working day. A priority system might be needed to distinguish requests requiring immediate response from those with longer time frames.

Onboarding

For new starters joining the network, if an in-person meeting isn't possible, arrange a one-on-one video session to explain your processes and introduce them to key team members. Consider pairing the newcomer with a mentor/go-to contact: the virtual equivalent of being able to pop your head around the door of a friendly colleague.



One-on-one check-ins

In virtual group meetings, it is a lot harder to 'read the room' to spot concerns and develop a general sense of how well the project is progressing. To counter this, regular one-on-one video meetings with team members provides the opportunity to explain things more clearly, to let them know where they fit in to the big picture, to address any concerns individuals may be reluctant to raise over Zoom and to double-check for comprehension.

Performance management

In preparation for a move to a new automated system, you have delegated the task of verifying a batch of legacy data to a member of your finance team. This individual is usually diligent, but you notice that a series of deadlines on the task are not being met.

In a non-virtual environment, you would be able to pop your head around the door for a quick chat. In your new, dispersed environment, you might be tempted to just send a chaser email instead. Just be aware that this could come across as unintentionally terse. Instead, consider arranging a brief catch-up video-con to discuss any bottlenecks or wider concerns.



Where to next?

From advisory services and filling the gaps in your in-house skillset, through to full project management, Millennium Consulting can deliver all the support you need for delivering a successful office of finance transformation.

To ensure your project stays on track, speak to Millennium Consulting today at assist@millenniumconsulting.com