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DESPITE physical distance in virtual teams, it takes only a little extra effort from you as a virtual team leader to connect with everyone in a remote team.

Here are six practical ideas to build a strong "community" presence in such virtual environments, adapted from a *LifemeetsWork.com* article titled 10 more ideas for Building Strong Virtual Teams.

1 CORPORATE CARE PACKAGES

Many companies have promotional or corporate items such as stress balls, stationery, mugs and corporate calendars sitting around their main office.

As a leader or facilitator of a virtual team, remember to include your virtual team members when such goodies and/or product samples are distributed.

A simple gesture such as this shows your thoughtfulness and care towards them.

2 TEAM PROFILE SHARING

Use shared team profiles as an avenue to get to know each other.

On a serious note, basic information should include ways to reach them and their communication preferences with regard to work.

On a lighter side of things, include trivia about themselves such as their pet's name, hobbies, favourite music, quirks, etc.

As a virtual team leader, encourage your team members to take turns to

TAKING THE VIRTUAL LEAD

6 IDEAS TO BUILD A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

share a little bit about themselves monthly, for example.

3 VIRTUAL OFFICE TOUR

Most laptops today come with webcam and wireless internet access functionality. So, why not use it to showcase your office to your virtual members? Have them do the same.

Be creative and utilise it to share some crazy things that happen around the office, especially during special occasions such as birthdays and holiday parties.

4 VIRTUAL NETWORKING

Allocate a short amount of time in a day (or two) to talk to your team members about non-work related matters.

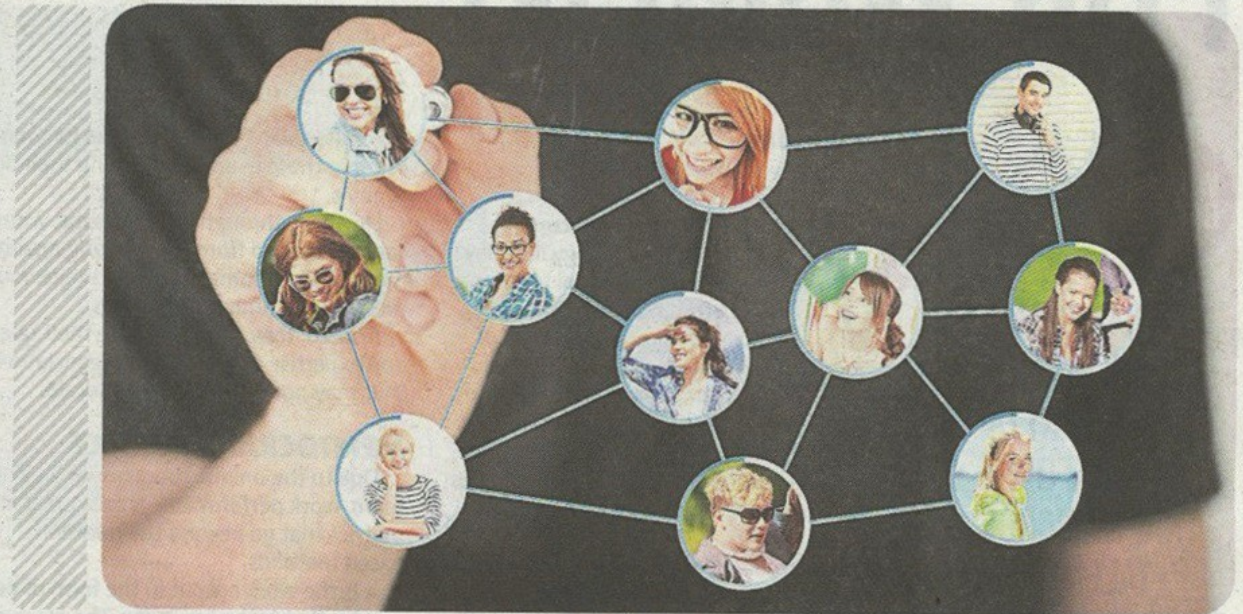
Take note of little things that matter to them such as important events in their personal and family life.

Acknowledge birthdays and be on the lookout for news or books that might interest them.

Essentially, investing your time in people helps build rapport and relationships beyond just work.

5 VIRTUAL CONTESTS

Initiate random contests to get your team members excited to participate.



Contests can range from trivial questions about the company to more lively ones such as the most Christmassy cubicle. In the latter, use videoconferencing so everyone can show off their decoration and rally for votes.

What about a competition to guess correctly names of team members based on baby photos of themselves posted on your team website?

6 SHARED STORAGE

Creating one virtual community or shared drive where all of your team's documents are kept and updated makes everyone feel included, no matter where they are working.

The shared drive should store team-related documents such as team member profiles, team blueprints, goals, process documentation and stretch project plans.

This is vital so that no one in the

team feels isolated just because he or she cannot find a document, or was not aware that such documents existed.

■ *What are some of your experiences with virtual teams? How do you overcome the barrier of physical team dispersion? How would you build your virtual community in your team? Share them with us at editor@leaderonomics.com*