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Virtual Teams

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Using today's technology to work across company boundaries and in partnership with vendors and customers is quickly becoming the preferred working method of many industries. The design industry, to continue to do "smart work," will also benefit from becoming more aware of how much more productive and cost-effective it can be to work in virtual teams rather than only face to face.

For companies as traditionally grounded as architecture and design firms, this is, for many, a real eye-opener. "I can't think of any project that we do on our own," says Gary Wheeler, past president of the American Society of Interior Design (ASID), who leads the Chicago office of Perkins & Will, the architectural, engineering, and interior design firm. "There is just too much to know and there are too many specialties in the built environment." Wheeler's office is just completing a project for ADC, the Minneapolis-based broadband company. "We did all the program interviews over their intranet site allowing up to 5,000 people the opportunity to give input. We got 30–40 percent response, where normally we get 10–20 percent. We're involving people from HR, IT, facilities, and management on the core team. We validated our findings with them then shared them with leadership. A great deal was done via the net."

This chapter will tackle the major questions: What are virtual teams? Why should design firms think seriously about using them? And finally, what have others learned about the challenges facing virtual teams that make a designer's success more likely?

VIRTUAL TEAMS: WHAT ARE THEY?

A virtual team, like any working team, gathers expert people together to solve a particular problem or create a particular product. Working in teams, face to face, is a well-recognized organizational concept. But what if the virtual team is able to do its work across geographic and internal barriers by using electronic technology, thus enabling the team to work together in totally new