- **Shorten cycle time** ***by moving from serial to parallel processes, establishing better communications, and generating more widespread trust.***
- **Increase innovation** ***by permitting more diverse participation, stimulating product and process creativity, and encouraging new business development synergies.***
- **Leverage learning** ***by capturing knowledge in the natural course of doing the work, gaining wider access to expertise, and sharing best practices.***

Design teams that work virtually will find they can do together what they cannot do alone. And most amazing, their whole will be more than the sum of their parts. And, as Hank McKinnell, president and COO of Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company, says, "No matter how effective any one person is, all of us are smarter than any of us."[2]

Most of the virtual teams we have interviewed for the book we authored, *Virtual Teams* (Wiley, New York, 2000) use telephone conference calls to provide real-time meetings; many also rely on videoconferencing. People at Buckman Labs, for instance, found that a very active on-line conversation through their intranets can be fast-paced enough to seem almost real-time. Many find that asynchronous communications, like threaded conversations resembling verbal exchanges, are effective ways to communicate. These "virtual water coolers" offer entirely new options for shaping meaningful aggregations in virtual teams while supporting their dispersion.

Time can be stretched. This is an obvious benefit to design teams. Virtual teams began viewing time as representing the results of human choice and design–why, when, and how we will meet; why, when and how we will divide and do the work. Co-located teams can quickly share these ideas, correct misunderstandings, and work through problems. Virtual teams need to be more explicit in their planning. Clarifying goals, tracking tasks, and accounting for results are all part of the elaborating process in a manner visible to all members of the team. This really does work if–*if*–all members of the team have a very clear shared purpose. And if they are based on trust, one of virtual teams' greatest challenges.

VIRTUAL TEAM CHALLENGES

Some virtual teams

Some virtual teams fail. One of the reasons is that there are obvious differences in working environments. If people do not make accommodation for how different it really is when they and their colleagues no longer work face to face, teams can fall apart.

Everything that can go wrong with in-the-same-space teams can also plague virtual teams. Only worse, because it can go wrong faster and less gracefully. Going virtual is for most people a wrenching experience, both in adapting to new technologies and in adopting new behaviors and working relationships.

Egos, power plays, backstabbing, hurt feelings, low confidence, poor self-esteem, leaderlessness, and lack of trust all harass virtual teams. When communication breaks down, people must take measures to repair it. It is just that much more difficult to communicate across distance and organizations using tenuous electronic links.

TRUST: THE KEY TO VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

People work together

People work together because they trust one another. They make deals, undertake projects, set goals, and lend one another resources. Teams with trust converge more easily, organize their work more quickly, and manage themselves better. Less trust makes it much more difficult to generate and sustain successful virtual teams.

Without daily face-to-face cues, trust is at once both harder to attain and easier to lose. Mistrust slips in between the slender lines of long-distance communication stripped of the nuances of in-person interaction. Business can grind to a halt when trust breaks down.

Successful virtual teams pay special attention to building trust at each stage of their development. Trust originates in small groups—families, friendships, and myriad formal and information associations based on shared inter-