

# TRUST IN A VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

A STREETINVEST INC  
WHITE PAPER

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# THE TEAM



**Grace Keisner**  
**Development Director**

Grace joined StreetInvest first in 2012 and returned in 2020 to lead the development of StreetInvest Inc. In between this time, she trained with TeachFirst, taught in London schools and then joined PwC as a Management Consultant, with a specific focus on building resilient teams. She has an MA in Education, Policy and Society and is committed to working towards social and environmental justice.



**Duncan Ross**  
**Co-founder & CEO**

Before co-founding StreetInvest, Duncan worked for 30 years in the finance industry, culminating as a Managing Director of JPMorgan Chase. Over the last 15 years, his work has been focussed in the not-for-profit sector supporting street-connected children. He is a passionate StreetInvest trainer & facilitator.



**Alan Carter**  
**Head of Training**

Alan has over 30 years experience as a Teacher and Teacher Trainer. He joined StreetInvest in in 2014 as Head of Training and has been supporting StreetInvest Inc. to translate their expertise of building trust to that of the workplace.



**Illy Boyes**  
**Behavioural Insights Manager**

With a background in HR, behavioural insights and business psychology, Illy enjoys solving organisations' people challenges through a behavioural lens, ensuring lasting behavioural change.

# TRUST IN A VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

The reasons to invest in building trust throughout an organisation are clear and plentiful. It drives organisational performance (PwC, 2015), increases employee satisfaction (Costa, 2003), improves staff retention (Brunetto et al., 2012) and is linked to higher levels of employee wellbeing (Halliwell and Huang, 2011).



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in keeping virtual teams working together, highlighting clearly that organisations need to put more weight on trust as they continue functioning in the virtual world.

# WHY DO WE NEED TRUST IN VIRTUAL WORKPLACES?

Considering the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on remote working, the future of work is a key challenge for many organisations, for whom working from home culture was adopted almost overnight. As a continuing working dynamic for teams across the world, trust is of greater importance than ever – as working from home necessarily entails trust (Bishop, 2020).

There is a wide body of social psychology research looking at the impacts of remote working from a psychological perspective that has been generated since the 1980s (e.g. Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 1984). Studies show that the role of trust is even more important for virtual teams to function effectively than it is for physical teams (i.e. teams that work together

in the same place) (Breuer, Hüffmeier and Hertel, 2016). This is because of the autonomy employees have (Robert, Denis and Hung, 2009), and signals that in a virtual workplace, organisations must work harder to maintain a sense of team comradery. Additionally, fostering high levels of trust is identified as the key factor in keeping virtual teams working together (O'Hara-Devereux and Johansen, 1994), highlighting clearly that organisations need to put more weight on trust as they continue functioning in the virtual world.



Whilst the level of  
trust in a virtual

workplace is impacted by a multiple of  
different organisational factors, open  
and unambiguous communication  
within teams is always paramount

# WHAT MAKES TRUST IN THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE DIFFERENT?

Researchers have theorised that the trust that forms in virtual teams is different from that in physical teams (Javernpaa and Leider, 1998). Termed 'swift trust', it is more fragile, and predicated upon interpersonal relationships to a lesser extent than traditional trust. This form of trust develops due to the necessity in order to complete tasks. However, because traditional trust forms when confidence in the abilities of team members grows, swift trust forms as an intermediary, when this verification process is not able to happen as fast (as is the case in virtual workspaces).

This highlights the need to adapt people strategy when considering how to optimise virtual team working, and how to enhance interpersonal relationships to strengthen the trust between teammates.

In addition to eliciting a different type of trust, trust in virtual workplaces is impacted differently by other organisational factors (Powell, Galvin and Piccoli, 2006). For example, both high normative and affective commitment (i.e. the commitment an employee demonstrates towards their organisation, based on a feeling of obligation and

emotional connection respectively) have a more important role in promoting trust in virtual workplaces than in physical workplaces. Additionally, well-defined work processes are more strongly associated with high trust for virtual teams.

A number of studies have examined conditions conducive for successful remote work through the development of trust within teams (e.g. Jarvenpaa and Leider, 1998). Researchers (e.g. Iano and Weisband, 1997) suggest that continuous and frequent communication between team members fosters trust, and maintains it over the duration of the working relationship. In addition, building up social connections at the start of a project has been shown to result in higher efficacy between teammates. One difficulty that arises in the virtual environment is when trust is broken. As face-to-face interactions are known to be the gold standard for repairing trust, this is a challenge for organisations when in-person interventions are not possible. However, research has identified solutions to trust issues in the virtual workplace.

With this in mind, open and unambiguous communication within teams is paramount. Particularly in virtual teams, being explicit about preferred working patterns between workplaces can enhance the work environment. Being able to conjure a mental image of a colleague's working environment helps to foster a shared team experience, so doing tours of each others' work spaces are recommended (Ferrazzi, 2014).

The table below sheds more light on building trust in virtual workplaces:

<b>TO BUILD TRUST</b>	<b>POTENTIAL SOLUTION</b>
Build trust early on	Social communication – exchanging social information on a consistent basis throughout period of working relationship (i.e. not just at start), alongside task-orientated messages.
Conveying enthusiasm	Clearly communicating enthusiasm and excitement about project/work. Actively celebrate specific team and individual successes (i.e. not generic “well done team” and isolating particular examples of good work). Earmark specific time in group meetings to exchange positive news (e.g. something in the past week that has gone well at work, and something outside of work). Important that this is not treated as a tick-box exercise, and is conveyed with authenticity.
Task clarity	Low trust within project teams is associated with confusion about task and failure to communicate this to the project team. High trust within teams is associated with good team management (e.g. overview of when people would be working/unavailable), as well as clarification and consensus on task requirements.
Initiative	Higher initiative in employees resulted in high trust amongst team members (i.e. asking for volunteers was not needed) – even when there is a designated leader. Initiative-building strategies, and assessing candidates to ascertain whether they demonstrate taking initiative to be built into recruitment processes.
Predictable communication	Communicating absences ahead of time. Planned communication – i.e. not sporadic (e.g. daily check-ins, weekly emails/updates, longer communications monthly/quarterly etc.).
Substantive and timely response	All team members receive responses on time that outline exactly what is required of them.
Leadership	Positive leadership behaviours – good management and feedback (private, targeted, specific, etc.)

# MEASURING TRUST IN THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

A key component in an organisation's trust building journey is measurement, and the same is true when doing so within virtual teams. Recognising that this is something that organisations find difficult to do (Deloitte, 2020), StreetInvest Inc. has developed a bespoke Trust and Wellbeing diagnostic tool to accurately measure the level of trust in an organisation, whether physical or virtual.

To hear more about how StreetInvest Inc. can help you meet your business need through building trust, you can find out more on [www.streetinvest.org/streetinvestinc](http://www.streetinvest.org/streetinvestinc), or contact a member of the team.

**For further information on  
Trust in the Workplace or StreetInvest's offer,  
please contact Grace Keisner or Duncan Ross at**

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