
Global Virtual Teams

By Lothar Katz

Things have changed at the workplace. Many of us remember the days when working at a company commonly meant working at the place where our co-workers also worked. It used to be that Joe, whose office was two floors up in IT support, was the most 'remote' person you ever had to deal with, maybe with the exception of that district sales rep living an hour away, whom you sometimes had to call.

No more. Nowadays, it is the norm for professionals to work with colleagues who could be anywhere in the world. Except for using the same language (more or less), many of today's work teams are mind-bogglingly diverse, with team members on several continents, some working from home and others working at corporate offices, some working for the same company and others working for subcontractors or as freelancers.

Let's define Virtual Teaming as working with a geographically distributed, but otherwise fairly homogeneous, team whose members rarely or never meet face-to-face. As anyone who's ever tried knows, achieving strong work results in such a setting is hard. Adding 'Global' to the mix makes it even harder, given the whole new set of challenges that aspects such as language barriers, distance, time zones, and cultural differences present. Companies are getting better at creating the right virtual work environment and providing useful communication and collaboration tools. Nevertheless, being in charge of a Global Virtual Team (GVT) requires a rare combination of talents: great leadership skills and the ability to manage high degrees of complexity. Here are a few suggestions that may help you master this challenge:

Create a Sense of One Team

The greatest challenge in virtual collaboration is establishing a common purpose and vision across the team. Your GVT will be ineffective, unless each of its members understand the 'why, what and how' of the team's charter and objectives. Moreover, you need to work hard to ensure that every individual member and every sub-team see themselves as a part of the bigger structure. Create a team website with everyone's pictures and bios, explore cultural differences jointly and in ways that promote mutual understanding, promote regular individual and sub-team communication, hold frequent 'virtual celebrations' highlighting everybody's contributions – do whatever it takes to establish a sense of 'one-ness' across your whole team.

Keep It Simple

Before assigning roles and responsibilities, analyze the geographic and cultural borders you are dealing with. Then, look for ways that avoid crossing them any more than necessary. If you can, divide team projects in ways that minimize the complexity of the job by assigning tasks to co-located sub-teams, to people working in the same geographic region or to team members with a similar cultural background. That way, you are reducing the need for your team members to work across any of the barriers that complicate long-distance cross-cultural collaboration.

Share the Pain

Working across large geographic distances and different time zones is tough on everyone. Make sure it is not tougher for some on your team than it is for others. For example, vary the times of required team conference calls to ensure that it is not always the same individual or group having to work very late or get up very early. It is essential that all team members view the arrangement as fair.

Leverage Technology, But Don't Rely On It

Sharepoint servers, video conferences, team blogs, wikis and the plethora of other virtual collaboration tools that are available today can be a godsend. They promote greater clarity of communication and facilitate asynchronous exchanges far better than email ever could. However, as a global virtual team leader, you'll need to consider the implications and limitations of these tools. Some messages are preferably delivered person-to-person and could be stifled by a person-to-machine-to-machine-to-person link. Through asynchronous communication, you're not likely to learn about that little gotcha caused by a team member in India, or that quarrel between two key employees in Denmark, though both might affect the whole team. Some conversations require a level of trust and comfort that only exists when talking face-to-face or, at best, over the phone. As a GVT leader, it is up to you to enable and promote open and trusting communication – so use technology only for what it's good for.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
