

How's Your Distributed Team Doing?

10 Suggestions From The Field

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You've just been assigned to a team with members from all over the world and you wonder, where do I start? How do I overcome the organizational and geographical dispersion of my team members? How can I make sure everyone stays as dedicated as if the whole team was co-located?

These are common questions in today's world, where this form of project abounds: opening new markets in Europe, developing partnerships with service providers in Asia, building new infrastructure in Africa are all situations where collaboration at a distance may be required.

Such collaboration is not without challenges and the greatest one is certainly overcoming the idea that communication and information technologies can address all problems. Dealing with distributed teams is certainly easier (and in fact, is reinforced) by the availability of increasingly sophisticated tools. However, project managers must take a large array of factors into account in order to succeed.

In order to get a wide-ranging, up-to-date picture of success factors for working with distributed teams, we recently conducted a survey of 150 project professionals involved in this kind of project. Regardless of the size of the team, the degree of dispersion and the type of project, our objective was to have respondents pinpoint a Top 10 list of actions that are vital to distributed teams today. Here are the actions that respondents think are critical:

1. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate
Ahead of all other factors, project managers think communication is the key lever for ensuring the success of distributed teams. In fact,

two-thirds of our respondents identified this as the most important factor to take into account when dealing with distributed teams. *Easier said than done*, some would say. Right. But ignoring communication could be highly detrimental to your team and your project. When questioned about the meaning of good communication, professionals used terms such as “open,” “transparent” and “frequent discussions within the team.” One of them reports: *“We had video-conferencing every week (...) after a while, people would get sick of having to attend long, tedious virtual meetings. But overall, these sessions were really helpful - we learned to solve problems during these meetings. Constant communication through these mandatory meetings helped us avoid major problems.”*

But communication can have different meanings as you cross cultural and temporal boundaries. Project managers must make sure they understand the patterns of communication that may be peculiar to certain teams, and not

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assume there is “one best way” for communication. In certain countries, for example, people may be reluctant to tell a manager that the project is late, or that they have a conflict with a teammate. That's why specific training, particularly on cultural diversity, is so important for people who get involved in distributed projects.

Generally speaking, the teams' processes and systems must also support a high level of rich communication. Frequent meetings, both virtual and face-to-face, are essential to maintain effective channels of communication. In larger projects, communication protocols might be appropriate too. But don't just wait for communication issues to become "obvious" to everyone! You need to plan for it, just as you do for all the other project activities.

2. Get The Right Tools

As argued above, technology is not the only answer for dealing with distributed projects, but it certainly plays a vital role. People need effective tools - not necessarily the most sophisticated tools, but reliable ones. In some cases, standardization of tools and centralization of information on a common database may be required. The keyword is the fit between the team's needs and the system that supports both formal and informal exchanges between teammates: *"You can have all the technology you want, but if people don't know how to use it, this technology is completely useless,"* argues a project manager in charge of an international project. This is why many of the respondents emphasize the way these tools are selected. Team leaders must make sure that the tools are available to all, and that all members have the proper training and skills to use them.

Don't forget, even the simplest tool such as e-mail may not suit everyone, as this software engineer reported: *"You need to learn how people like to communicate too. At first, I was receiving e-mails from this engineer and I thought she was mad at me - her e-mails were very short, telegraphic style, without standard letter openings or closures. After a while, I realized she had difficulty using a keyboard and that she much preferred talking on the phone!"*

3. Build and Nurture Trust Throughout the Project Life Cycle

Trust-building is another critical factor that project professionals value a lot when dealing with distributed teams. Trust is not always easy to define or describe: Some respondents

talk about respecting and listening to each other, making sure everyone collaborates to his/her full potential; others would refer to shared vision, or to a collective commitment to achieve goals. One thing is clear: Trust is not something you can achieve very rapidly. In distributed settings, this can take even longer than planned, as people don't meet very often and therefore take more time to relate to the other teammates. Most experienced professionals would advise that you start building trust right at the beginning of the project.

Building trust doesn't mean glossing over all differences within a team. As the project is populated with people from various backgrounds, nationalities and languages, you need to see this as an advantage, not an obstacle. Recognizing and respecting other members' differences is hard to do but essential in a virtual context.

Most respondents would say that informal, out-of-office interactions are key to creating trust among team members. One experienced

manager was very clear about it: *"You need to create informal events where people can interact freely, in a relaxed context. This helps create stronger links between people - they are human after all,*

they need to relate to each other! Many important and positive aspects of a team can emerge in an informal context. Every time we had a face-to-face meeting, we took the opportunity to organize a social activity."

4. Align Working Practices Among Project Team Members

In addition to the desire to create an open and trusting environment, many project managers highlight the importance of having agreed-upon working practices within the team. Distance and organizational culture are often viewed as obstacles to achieving this: *"What is difficult with distance, because we're not familiar with the way they work, is to align with each other's processes, and to come up with an agreed-upon modus operandi that everyone is comfortable with."* Acknowledge the fact that the distributed team will need time and effort to reach such an agreement.

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Aligned working practices can involve a very wide spectrum of project dimensions, ranging from how people exchange information to the type of standards to apply. At times, very specific details can hamper the project, as this engineer reports: *“We quickly realized that we did not share the same software, the same way of numbering the drawings, etc. Even the vocabulary was different in many respects. Considering the distance and the language barriers, this all created unexpected delays for the project.”*

5. Agree Upon a Common Vision and Goals, Then Closely Monitor the Project

More than in other types of projects, working with a distributed team requires a lot of effort upfront so that everyone shares a common vision of the project. Most respondents identified this as a difficult, yet essential, target to achieve.

Throughout the process (and the earlier, the better), you need to make sure this vision is translated in well-defined goals, and that these goals are communicated properly to all the distributed members. This may represent a challenge in itself, making sure the project goals are compatible with local constraints and interests. Oftentimes, this is where it gets rough: some people may have to work on several projects simultaneously, others may feel isolated from the rest of the team, etc. As new people come on board during the course of the project, it certainly requires constant attention.

Most of the people surveyed also insist on the importance of monitoring the project's progress and staying “connected” with what happens at

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each site. This may seem obvious to any project manager but in the case of distributed teams, it is both critical and difficult to achieve: *“You want to avoid the 'out of sight, out of mind' attitude,” one project manager says. “Every week I wanted to hear from my people, even though very few items needed to be reported. You need to stay in touch: What's the status of your work? Do you foresee any problems? Is the goal still achievable?”*

6. Appoint a Strong Leader But Encourage Shared Leadership

Distributed teams require strong leadership, most respondents say, starting from the top. Considering the diversity of people who usually form a distributed team, team leaders must be particularly good at creating an open environment for collaboration: *“Our leader knew how to create a strong esprit de corps even though the team was spread out all over the planet!”* one engineer reports. *“In such a distributed environment, he spent a lot of time making sure people locally had the necessary conditions and motivation to carry out their tasks.”*

According to the respondents, a strong leader must also be supported by a highly motivated and determined team of people: *“Every member needs to be a leader in some way,”* as reported by one respondent, underscoring the importance of being involved and dedicated.

7. Look for Expertise and Motivation

In a distributed environment, you've absolutely got to assemble a team of very competent people, as direct supervision is more difficult. Not only do you need technical skills that fit with the project, but interpersonal and communication skills are critical too. In most of the distributed projects that we looked at, knowing several languages was a real asset, as this project leader reported: *“As I needed to travel to the various sites often, knowing three languages helped me a lot; I could interact easily with other people in their own language; that made a difference and helped me get information that I would not have got so easily otherwise.”*

If expertise is one side of the coin, motivation is the other. And either one without the other can be detrimental to the project's success. Working on a distributed team certainly requires people who can work without constant feedback or a “pat on the back” in order to stay motivated. As project managers, you must make sure these highly motivated people work in local conditions that are compatible with what you expect of them.

8. Pay Attention to the Decision-Making Process

Decision-making is at the center of project management and several of the respondents involved in distributed teams think of it as one of the most important issues to deal with, right at the beginning of the project: *“Don't wait until you have a conflict with the other sites,”*

one respondent reminded us, *“Make sure you agree on how decisions ought to be made.”*

Knowing that distance, time zone differences and cultural diversity can create all sorts of difficulties for making timely decisions, many experienced project managers insist that formal processes be in place and “visible” to all: well-defined stage gates, a process for collecting opinions from each site, a clear initial statement about decision-making responsibilities, problem-solving mechanisms, etc.

Experience will probably tell you what process fits best with your organizational context. Should your organization decentralize decision-making or not? Do you need consensus on every decision? What criteria should important decisions about the project be based on? In the context of a distributed team, these questions are crucial and must be addressed. Though several options may exist, according to our survey most managers agree that a proper information management system will be needed to support the decision-making process.

9. Encourage Sharing of Information, Know-How and Perspective

Project managers who have had experience with distributed teams watch for any tendency for some sites to isolate themselves from the others, or to restrict information-sharing for

with other people's perspectives. Diversity of academic, professional, cultural or organizational backgrounds is clearly a source of progress, this manager claims: *“Opening oneself up to a colleague's culture is not so easy when it concerns work, but after a while, you realize that it really enriches the project.”* When a real cooperative climate is created within the distributed team, it will be easy to identify the channels through which information, know-how and perspective can be shared.

10. Insist on Top Management Support From All Sites

All the above factors remain difficult to implement if the organizational support is inadequate. Some respondents suggest that asking top managers to recognize the particular features of distributed teaming is *“like oil in the gears.”* As leader of your project, you need to make sure your top managers' expectations are well managed in terms of deliverables, cost and time. Resources must be in line with expectations. And distributed teaming often requires additional resources, especially in terms of supportive IT systems.

What may be considered a lack of motivation or dedication on the part of team members may in fact be a lack of support from other sites' management teams, as reported by this IT project manager: *“Not only do you need the buy-in from*

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various reasons. This is a particularly acute difficulty when teams are asked to collaborate with potentially “competing” sites, as in the case of several subsidiaries within a multinational firm. One engineer was particularly concerned about this: *“They ask me to work with these guys but I feel like I'm gradually giving away my knowledge... what will happen next?”* These are legitimate concerns that managers need to address. People need to have a clear understanding of the reasons for and benefits of sharing information and know-how.

The people who have benefited the most from working with a distributed team are those who see this as an opportunity to enrich their vision

your top management, but you've got to make sure senior management located at the other sites share the same vision too... and that the resources follow. In fact, this has been my No. 1 battle since the outset of the project. You want to make sure each member of the team, no matter which site they are working at, gets the support they need from their own organization. If that doesn't happen, you'll get frustrated very quickly.”

Conclusion

The survey revealed several key dimensions in ensuring that distributed teams are properly managed and successful. Several of these dimensions are very similar to those that apply to co-located teams. However, these 10 success

factors appear particularly critical in the case of distributed teams. If they aren't in place, projects can find themselves in critical positions, according to our respondents.

Overall, distributed teams present a challenge that many people would prefer to avoid. In an ideal world, most people would prefer to work on a dedicated, local team. But this is simply not the reality today and the future is likely to bring increasing opportunities for firms to work in distributed mode.

So, how do we replace the five o'clock baseball or soccer game and the cafeteria gossip as means of creating team spirit? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. The nice side of working in distributed mode, however, is that it can stimulate a team to develop new capabilities, both technical and non-technical. And this can mean increased value for the team and the organization, as this project manager recognizes: *“Overall, working as a distributed team served as a trigger and forced the local people to develop better project management practices. We had no choice as it would have meant chaos, otherwise. We are definitely better off now.”*

Project teams today rarely have the luxury of deciding whether to work in virtual mode or not. However, this can serve as a unique chance to develop team members' project management capabilities, provided they are given the opportunities and the resources.

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About the Survey

In late 2006, Professors Bourgault and Drouin teamed up with the PMI Montreal Chapter and conducted an electronic survey on various aspects of distributed projects and virtual teams. Participants in the survey were all involved in distributed projects. A majority of participants (60%) had Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification. The results presented in this article have been extracted from a list of more than 350 items. They represent the most often cited items reported by the participants in the survey.

Professors Bourgault and Drouin would like to thank all people who agreed to participate in the survey. Readers interested in expressing their views on this topic can log on to the following address and complete the questionnaire: www.distributed-teams.com.