

Leading an International Virtual Team: Tips for Success

Leading and managing virtual teams — particularly international teams — is challenging and risky. Here are six tactical guidelines that will help ensure team cohesion and effectiveness.

Core Topics

Business Management of IT: Workforce Strategies; Workplace Strategies

Key Issues

How do workforce management issues vary by geography, industry and enterprise size?
How will organizational strategies evolve to support the transformation to the electronic workplace?

Strategic Planning Assumption

Through 2005, 50 percent of international virtual teams will experience suboptimal performance because of inattention to cultural differences (0.7 probability).

Tactical Guidelines

1. Team leaders need to focus on the cultural differences of team members and take positive measures to heighten team awareness and sensitivity to these differences in team interaction.
2. Team work practices should recognize and accommodate differences in HR policies relating to performance measurement, official working hours, and other labor practices and constraints unique to team members' local work environments.
3. A sufficient budget should be established to ensure an effective team start-up process to include a face-to-face initial team meeting and team member training in virtual teaming techniques and practices.
4. Team meeting times should be held on a regular basis (at least once a week) and should rotate meeting times to share the inconvenience of different time zones.
5. The rules of effective virtual team communication should be rigorously applied.
6. Technology tools should be selected that accommodate differences in local standards, communication speeds and protocols.

Gartner research confirms that the greatest risk to virtual teaming is cultural risk, in terms of company culture and — more important — differences in geographic culture. These differences present significant challenges, since international virtual teams are growing rapidly as globalization continues. Many clients report that the single biggest driver of virtual teaming is the move toward global organizational structures that require employees and other constituents to work across international boundaries. The challenges of leading and managing virtual teams are intensified in international virtual teams because of the different cultures, languages, business practices and attitudes relating to hierarchy and power. It is critical that leaders of international virtual teams adhere to guidelines in the formation, support and management of the international virtual team. We have identified six guidelines that will significantly increase team effectiveness and cohesion.

1. Beware of cultural risks. Cultural differences represent the single biggest impediment to building trust within the international virtual team. Face-to-face communication is highly valued in Eastern and European cultures. In North America, on the other hand, there is a higher tolerance for virtual communication. Attitudes toward authority, rank and organizational position vary considerably by geographic region, which can create significant interpersonal conflict and resentment within international teams. Differences in language, particularly local colloquialisms and idioms, can confuse and perplex team members and lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. *Action Item: Team leaders need to be cognizant of cultural differences of team members and increase team awareness of these differences through individual coaching and mentoring. During virtual team meetings, the leader needs to frequently test for understanding and encourage input from all team members. The leader should*

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put cultural issues on the agenda early to allow team members to air concerns and inhibitors.

2. Be mindful of local HR policies. HR policies and practices vary widely by geographic location. For example, several European countries enforce stringent rules relating to work hours. Performance measurement varies by business culture. The issue of reconciling work commitments to local reporting entities vs. virtual team commitments must be negotiated for each team member. *Action Item: Virtual team leaders need to coordinate with the HR department within each virtual team member's organization to identify and resolve issues relating to differing work rules and practices, differences in performance measurement practices, and time allocation and budget transfer issues. We recommend that a memorandum of understanding be executed between the virtual team leader and team members' organizations outlining agreements on these issues. The leader should also solicit input from team members on local HR practices that may create a problem in their area of operation.*

3. Budget for an initial face-to-face meeting. A cardinal rule of virtual teaming is to bring the team together face to face at the outset. This can be financially prohibitive — particularly during periods of economic distress. *Action Item: Team leaders need to ensure that an adequate budget is established to execute the team start-up process effectively (see "Initializing a Virtual Team: What Are the Most Critical Steps?" TG-12-5041). Every effort should be made to convene the team in an initial face-to-face meeting to build rapport between team members. Short of a face-to-face meeting, a videoconference should be arranged to allow people to visit team members visually and to associate faces with names. The initial meeting should be used to agree on team communication protocols, team member roles and responsibilities, and the development of the initial work plan. Also, a training module on virtual teaming techniques and practices helps to acclimate and sensitize team members to the challenges of virtual teaming — particularly cultural issues.*

4. Rotate team meeting times. One of the more disruptive aspects of virtual teaming is differences in time zones. For a global team, no single time slot is convenient for all members. *Action Item: The most popular practice for global teams is to rotate the meeting time for each virtual team meeting. While this may be challenging from a scheduling standpoint, it spreads the inconvenience of meeting times among team members. The audio meeting should be recorded and available for replay for members who miss a meeting. In addition, the team leader should ensure that minutes of each meeting are recorded and distributed to all team members and constituents.*

5. Follow explicit communication protocols. The most critical success factor for effective virtual teaming is establishing and enforcing team communication protocols. This is particularly true for international virtual teams with language and cultural differences. *Action Item: There are four key guidelines for virtual team communication. 1) Team members must identify when they are available to receive and respond to communication; these schedules must be respected by team members. 2) Team members must be explicit in their communications regarding intent, relevance, situation and purpose. 3) Team members should strive to meet regularly on a synchronous basis to maintain rapport and continuity. 4) Senders must take responsibility for prioritizing communications as urgent, important, routine or informational-only.*

6. Coordinate technology tools with local IS management. Technology infrastructure may vary by region relative to communication speeds, remote access capability, Web access and security. *Action Item: When selecting collaborative or meeting tools, the team leader should coordinate with the local IS organization to ensure that the selected application will be enabled and supported locally — particularly as it relates to Web access, firewall constraints and communication speeds. Beyond e-mail and telecommunications support, international virtual teams should consider an effective Web-based meeting application such as Web X or NetMeeting that provides for the sharing of graphics and text, as well as collaborative applications such as eRoom or Lotus QuickPlace. For project teams, consideration should also be given to project management applications such as Niku, Artemis and Microsoft Project.*

Bottom Line: Virtual teaming is growing internationally as enterprises convert to global organizational structures. However, international virtual teams present a host of distinct challenges because of cultural, language, business practice and time zone differences. Team leaders of international virtual teams must be highly cognizant and sensitive to these differences and take appropriate action at the onset of team formation, or risk team dysfunction and suboptimal performance.