Managing Projects on a Global Scale
By Curt Finch, CEO, Journyx

There are no longer many physical obstacles to performing global projects. Instantaneous global collaboration, inexpensive resource transportation, and near-global access to knowledge have expanded organizations' horizons and consumer markets. At the same time, however, these now-hurdled obstacles present new challenges to the global project manager: though distance is now surmountable, what happens when project team members speak different languages, for example? We may have instantaneous communication, but this doesn't necessarily translate into instant comprehension.

So where does this current level of interconnectedness leave the modern global project manager? The internet and globalization are too young to have expunged regional differences, yet they make collaboration between these regions too profitable to ignore. The following obstacles are real threats to conducting good business, but can all be hurdled using a combination of new technology – the tools which have brought us this far along – and old tactics – the tried and true elements which constitute business as we know it. Though new generations may not experience these same complications as we do today, they currently pose a threat to conducting smooth business.

Approaching Cultural Differences

The first crucial step toward achieving a positive leadership role is to wipe clear any notions of superiority that you may hold. Remain cognizant of the fact that your approach to business and life is not inherently better than any other, that not everyone functions as you do, and that your way isn't necessarily the best way to operate for all scenarios.

People of different backgrounds will approach situations in entirely different manners. The American approach to business is often individualistic, confrontational, and constructed on rigid contracts. These tactics may not fly elsewhere, where healthy collaboration reigns and your verbal word is the highest law. Be aware that differences will exist, and remain active in understanding those around you.

Agreeing on a Work Culture

While understanding key cultural differences is crucial to project success, it's also wise to establish standards as to meeting conventions, status updates, and work expectations. Don't assume that your team approaches these in the same manner; establish guidelines early on and get your team to collaborate effectively. Vocalize your expectations to remove tension and to get everyone on the same page.

At the same time, don't try to pave over real differences in the way your individual team members operate. Be aware of cultural differences and diverse work methodologies to bridge differences in the most positive manner possible. Let everyone bring their unique strengths to the table, but at the same time make sure they know exactly when to arrive at that table.

Achieving a Common Language

Though it's often the case that your team members speak some level of English, you may not always be so lucky.

English proficiency levels may also be lower than you'd like, hindering easy communication and slowing down processes as a result. While it may be advantageous for you to learn the language over the course of long projects, you'll still need to pound out work in the process.

While translators can be advantageous in certain situations, it's not practical to have somebody translating for each member of your team at all times. Though effective for group meetings, where everyone is present and you wouldn't want to waste time with poor communication, a human translator onsite is often an unnecessary and ineffective tool.

For a team spread across the world, written communication may be all you need. Oftentimes, individuals with little speaking proficiency can get by with the written word. If they aren't capable of this, then online translation services can often convey enough meaning to get an individual's point across. By sending emails, chatting with others online, or even texting, you'll be able to converse with all members of your group and possess written documentation of everything being said.

This is also an effective way to bring shier team members out of their shells. People will be much more open to speaking up through email or in chats than they may be in a meeting, especially when a language barrier is involved. Though face-time is always important, sometimes the easiest communication is achieved through our new technological methods.

Managing Multiple Calendars

This often-overlooked aspect of global project management presents an interesting challenge to project managers. With team members spread across the world, it may be nearly impossible to find days when the entire team is at hand. Religious holidays, national holidays, regional work norms, and vacation time can all provide dangerous obstacles to project completion.

While the average American work week may extend well beyond 40 hours, one can't expect the same from every Latin-American, European, or any other work force. Members of your team may not be legally capable of extending their work week beyond 37 hours, or may be expected to take off all of August. Other regions may invest even more or fewer hours a week, but regardless you can't hold the same expectations.

Create a group calendar for every individual to place expected time off, local holidays, and other events that may eventually come between you and project success. By preparing for delays, you'll be more capable of delivering projects on time.

Holding Meetings

Modern project management tools, email, online chat, and video conferencing may one day make face-to-face meetings almost obsolete, but there's something still incredibly valuable to the personal meeting that shouldn't be ignored. Your team members need this opportunity to interact with one another and to boost their sense of teamwork and collaboration, especially when scattered across the globe.

Meeting can be a challenge when your team is spread across continents, but the potential costs of a failed project or late delivery can vastly outweigh simple travel expenses. Try to make time for team gatherings when possible, and do what you can to increase human interaction wherever possible.

Managing Different Time Zones

If you're working with a development engineer in China, an engineer in Los Angeles, and a programmer in the United Kingdom, finding a single time to meet that works for everyone will never be achieved. The simplest solution is just to buck up and let everyone have a turn at the short straw.

By having some of your team come in early, and some stay late, you should be able to accommodate most time zones and project members. Occasionally a member of your team may need to meet in the dead of the night, but as long as you shift the meeting hours and lay this burden on everyone fairly, you should be able to pull it off without upsetting too many of your team members.

A Final Note

As with any project management issue, it's imperative that you understand the strengths and weaknesses of each of your team members in order to complete projects on time. Spend time getting to know everyone, encourage collaboration and an *esprit de corps*, and assign work accordingly. Understanding the mix of your team's skills, experiences, and personalities allows you to adapt your project to the team's unique DNA.

Different cultures may complement one another, but it's also possible that they will butt heads. Plan accordingly, be prepared to adapt quickly, and arm yourselves with the right tools and you should be able to pull off any project without too much of a hitch.

About the Author:

Curt Finch is the CEO of Journyx (pr.journyx.com),a provider of Web-based software located in Austin, Texas, that tracks time and project accounting solutions to guide customers to per-person, per-project profitability. Since 1996, Journyx has remained committed to helping customers intelligently invest their time and resources to achieve per-person, per-project profitability. Curt earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Science from Virginia Tech in 1987.

As a software programmer fixing bugs for IBM in the early '90's, Curt Finch found that tracking the time it took to fix each bug revealed the per-bug profitability. Curt knew that this concept of using time-tracking data to determine project profitability was a winning idea and something that companies were not doing – yet… Curt created the world's first web-based timesheet application and the foundation for the current Journyx product offerings in 1997. Curt is an avid speaker and writer. Learn more about Curt at *http://journyx.com/company/curtfinch.html*.