

Managing Virtual Teams on Complex Projects: The European Experience

By Bruce Beer, PMP

Working with virtual teams and PMOs has enough challenges when they are all contained in the USA. However, when these teams are global with different time zones and languages, the task has a certain dimension that adds a degree of difficulty.

My first experience with a virtual team was when I based in the UK and was asked to manage a pan-European project to implement a support service for Hewlett Packard throughout Europe. The application was developed in the US and was being implemented throughout eight European countries as well as Asia Pacific and the Americas.

Clearly it was certainly a large virtual project. The things that made it interesting to manage were the different cultures, time zones and languages. Take, for example, the European cultures. They ranged from:

- those who conducted projects with total precision and accuracy,
- those who agreed on a course of action then went off and operated independently,
- those who tried hard and were great fun to work with, but didn't always take life too seriously.

In Europe there are only two time zones, UK and European, so time difference was not a great problem, but we also had regular communications with HQ in Palo Alto on the West Coast, which involved an eight-hour time difference. As for the language issue, I tried to avoid the tendency to stick to English and simply speak louder and slower. Instead, I made an attempt to at least show willingness by using my rudimentary French and German, which often caused much merriment from my colleagues, leading to everyone resorting to English as the common language to the benefit of the team.

Key Lessons

What were the important lessons learned from this experience?

The first one was that for a virtual team it is imperative that the team meet face-to-face, at least once and preferably on a regular basis. I held a kick-off meeting in the UK. In addition to regular phone conferences, we had status meetings every month rotating around the other countries. When I say “we,” I mean just the project managers (PMs) from each country, not all of the team members. This did of course add to the expense, but in my view the cost was easily justified by the smoother communication and running of the project. There was quite a lot of interdependence between the various country teams, and trying to negotiate and get another country to cooperate was so much easier when you had met the person concerned, had a meal and a drink together and had built a personal relationship.

This leads to better communication on a virtual team. This is even more important than with a local team where you can just go and visit a colleague to ask a question and catch up on progress. Communication has to be well thought out and planned, taking into account time differences, language issues, project complexities and cultural differences.

Regarding different cultures, I just had to embrace that I wasn't going to change their culture; I just had to incorporate it into the plan. Some countries needed more management or direction; others, once we had agreed a course of action, just went away and implemented the plan.

Languages did cause me a problem initially, but it seemed I was the only one who had a problem. Everyone seemed to speak English at least as well as I did, some even better!. There was one Swiss teammate who could carry on multiple conversations at dinner in multiple languages, at the same time, a very impressive feat. In this project I was lucky we all spoke English, because had I been dealing with non-European language speakers who could not speak English, it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to manage the project.

I did meet and liaise with the US central developers and the PMs from Asia Pacific and the Americas to discuss any issues and lament over the issues we faced.

Conclusion

The best practices from this and subsequent large virtual teams were to:

1. Meet face to face at least once, not just to discuss work but also to socialize and get to know the other team members a little, even though it adds cost.
2. Allow for and even embrace the different cultures.
3. Consider and plan communications very carefully.
4. Find a common language. This could be a major issue on a global project and it can't be ignored. A solution to communication and language barriers must be found.

All of this, however, is possible if you give the problem due consideration. Show a willingness to communicate in any language possible. Respect cultural differences and respectfully request that your own cultural expectations be met. Even the most far-flung project team will gravitate to a good project manager.

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About the Author

Bruce Beer, PMP, is a certified project manager with over 30 years in the IT industry and over 25 years of project management experience in Europe and North America, including 20 years for Hewlett Packard Consulting. He is the founder and president of Apollo Project Management Consulting and specializes in project management training, project recovery and project support. He is currently an instructor and course developer, including creating a class on project recovery. Bruce is a member of the Project Management Institute, Inc.