

# The Virtues of Virtual

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**Managing virtual project teams presents a host of challenges. But remote project managers who trust their people, establish solid processes and make the most of technology often can be more productive than their on-site counterparts.**

Instant messaging chat is the 21st century version of the water cooler. An intranet portal replaces the white board. A video-teleconferencing area takes on the role of the traditional conference room.

The vast array of technological tools available today — most of them literally at our fingertips — can bridge the geographic gap for those working with virtual project teams, allowing people to be completely accessible without being in the same building, the same country or the same continent.

But just because they are accessible via technology doesn't mean they are moving your project any closer to completion.

Leading-edge technology, while essential, is not enough by itself, according to Husam Sha'ath, who is currently managing development and implementation of a project management system for the Ministry of Works and Housing in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Sha'ath is based in the Persian Gulf island nation as the client team's on-site contact, while many of those producing deliverables on the project team are at SPM Group's Toronto headquarters nearly 7,000 miles to the northwest and eight hours behind Bahrain.

"The working day starts in Canada two hours after the work day officially ends in Bahrain," Sha'ath says. "So, generally, I start my work day at 7 a.m. Bahrain time, and I finish work at around 3 p.m. Then I start my calls and e-mails with Canada at 5 p.m. and that usually takes me to 9 p.m. or 10 p.m." That the Bahrain workweek, like that of many Persian Gulf countries, runs Sunday through Thursday only adds to the complexity.

Clearly, the challenge of distributed teams requires much more than the ability for team members to IM one another. Jon Hughes, who works exclusively with distributed teams as director of IT solutions for Robbins-Gioia, believes the success of managing a distributed project team comes down to three keys: people, process and tools.

## **People**

Hughes, who most recently managed a software project that involved team members in six different locations in the United States, says the first step to a successful distributed team is getting the right people.

"Not just anyone can do this," says Hughes, a 10-year veteran of project management based in Washington, D.C. "Distributed projects are often very

complex. You need the best of the best to help you run these projects. Hopefully, project managers will personally interview and recommend members of the team because you have to have the right people on the team.”

Getting the right people at the start, Hughes says, allows project managers to trust their employees, which is vital for virtual teams. “You can sometimes overcompensate and end up with extra checkpoints while working remotely. You can end up on the phone too much or on an aircraft too much. I once got off a plane and had a project manager tell me to go back to Washington. The person said, ‘Trust me. You gave me this job. Don’t be so worried.’”

Bryan Vermander, the vice president of SPM Group who is working on the Toronto end of the Bahrain project, advises that cultural differences between team members should be addressed upfront. “One of our advantages is that our project manager truly does understand the culture, because he has lived and experienced it,” Vermander says of Sha’ath. “Even as early as putting our proposal together, we were asking him about cultural expectations. Frankly, that has assisted us greatly and is one of the reasons we got the work to begin with.”

Clearly communicating roles, responsibilities and expectations — important for all work environments — is even more crucial when key personnel are split between North America and the Middle East. “A challenge for any project is team building,” Sha’ath says. “Now try that with thousands of miles of separation. But even if it is just a conference call or videoconference, such a call, if handled correctly, can give the client team and the project team time to meet each other and know each other.”

While it may seem to be a small point, the inability to call a working dinner for key team members without going through a travel agent illustrates why distributed teams must have processes, protocols and procedures spelled out well in advance of project launch.

### **Process**

Building a communication plan that takes into account the needs of a distributed team is perhaps the most important procedural item for a project manager, according to Robbins-Gioia’s Hughes.

“Nothing can hurt a distributed project more than an issue coming up in one location where no one knows where to take that problem,” he says. “So you want to start with a policy on the tools that you will use. You need a communication plan distributed to the entire team. The plan should make clear how everyone contacts their leadership and how to raise issues up the chain. This involves the customer as well.”

Such a plan is especially important for intercultural operations, says SPM’s Vermander, who points out that the comparatively flat org chart of his Toronto operation is vastly different from the more hierarchical operation in Bahrain. Vermander adds that a communication plan should also define common terms, abbreviations, acronyms and project management slang.

“Terminology issues with customers come up to a degree no matter where customers are located, but when you are going across cultures, the challenges can grow

exponentially," he says. "You need a lot of clarity in that area, and we knew that. But even now as we have gone forward with the project, there are new terms coming up that are used and that we need to ensure are clearly understood."

Before work began in Bahrain, SPM put together a detailed plan that included regularly scheduled virtual team meetings and conference calls. It also dictated that Sha'ath would regularly travel to Canada to spend two out of every eight weeks of the estimated 18-month project face-to-face with the Toronto team.

Hughes says one easily overlooked part of a communication plan is an electronic archiving process that defines how and by what method e-mails, copies of soft faxes and other documents are saved. "That might seem a little silly, but it is very important -- especially when working with the government," Hughes says.

The good news is that a project manager can write a virtual project team communication plan one time, and then apply the key parts to almost any distributed team.

### **Tools**

High-tech tools are the most high profile aspect of virtual teams, and therefore need to be acquired and thoroughly tested prior to launch. "When I first started working remotely, I told my supervisors, 'I need access to all the servers and all the source-code servers,'" Hughes says. "The code repositories need to be able to be accessed by all team members. People need to access the same information at the same time."

Most virtual team members constantly use chat or instant messaging software throughout the day. E-mail is another heavily used application, and phone contact generally takes place daily. Video-teleconferences are typically scheduled weekly.

Hughes highly recommends a voice-over IP phone system that fully integrates e-mail, fax and voice-mail functions because it simplifies the issue of archiving.

A recommendation from Vermander is a so-called "portable phone number," which he acquired for Sha'ath. It allows the Bahrain-based project manager to use a Toronto 416 number and make calls via his laptop as if he is in Canada.

With all the tools available, however, it is easy to cross the line and overcompensate for a lack of in-person interactions. "I encourage all team members to really think before they send an e-mail," Hughes says, "because sometimes you can get stuck in chat or spend all of your time answering e-mails."

### **Payoff**

With the challenges that virtual project teams present, it is easy to see why some might shy away from them. After all, those who manage remote teams such as Sha'ath, Vermander and Hughes face all the pressure to produce a quality product as their counterparts who work with on-site teams without the face-to-face communication that drive traditional projects.

But for those who focus on hiring and supporting the right people, who clearly establish and fine tune their processes as a project goes forward, and who embrace

the latest technological tools, the payoff can be immense. Virtual project managers can:

- > Hire the best people for the job regardless of geographic proximity.
- > Cut overhead related to brick-and-mortar office space.
- > Increase a project's pace by allowing team members clocking out in one time zone to pass pieces of the project to those arriving at the office in another.

"There are some real virtues to the whole process," says Vermander. "For example, the Bahrain-Toronto time difference allows us to sequence work so that our project manager can send us an e-mail and go to bed in Bahrain and when he wakes up the next morning and logs on, the response is waiting there."

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### **People, Process and Tools: The Breakdown**

Jon Hughes of Robbins-Gioia believes the success of managing a distributed project team can be categorized into three buckets: the people on and near the project team, the processes that the team has in place; and the tool sets being used to enable the processes and improve communication.

#### **People**

- \_\_\_ Trust yourself and your employees.
- \_\_\_ Clearly communicate roles, responsibilities and expectations.
- \_\_\_ As a team understand how productivity will be measured.

#### **Process**

- \_\_\_ Build a communication plan that takes into account the distributed team.
- \_\_\_ Define an electronic records archiving policy.
- \_\_\_ Establish an electronic communications standard.

#### **Tools**

- \_\_\_ Use collaborative workspaces to manage project content.
- \_\_\_ Deploy and use an online "chat-like" capability.
- \_\_\_ Use Internet-based meetings with both voice and video.

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