

Managing Across Geographies

In this article David Loveless of Transformis Consulting suggests some practical solutions to address the difficulties that project managers may face when managing an international project through a virtual team.

An international project team can be very diverse indeed in terms of nationality, business background, availability, employment status and of course skill set. It is this diversity which makes the team potentially so strong, but also raises two key issues that you the project manager will face with a virtual team of this nature:

- How to get commitment from a team that may be thousands of miles apart, on different time zones, have different work patterns and have completely different cultural backgrounds;
- How to negotiate and secure the time of any shared resource necessary to the project;

This article will deal with each of these issues in turn and then go on to consider how sensitivity and communication become particularly important when managing in this environment.

Building commitment

Even though a virtual team will operate in a distributed format, there is still great value in bringing them physically together for the project kick off. It is here that they can establish themselves as a recognisable team with an ‘alignment of purpose’ in relation to the project. If a physical team meeting is really not possible then every effort should be made to use alternatives such as video or tele-conferencing to stimulate discussion amongst the team along the lines listed below.

The objective of the project manager in such a meeting is to:

- Get the team members to introduce themselves to each other emphasising their skills and interests and what they expect from involvement in the project;
- Agree the ground rules for the project i.e. how the team will behave and what each one will get from the successful completion of the project (the team contract)
- Brand the project around the benefits and agree a suitable internal communication message to the organisation;
- Engage the team members in the more detailed planning of the project agreeing the appropriate methodology, the roles and responsibilities, the work breakdown structure, the schedule of delivery and the reporting processes;
- Identify and capture any immediate high level issues and risks and develop plans to eliminate or mitigate these;
- Develop an overall communication plan which leverages off a virtual project space (perhaps on the organisation’s intranet) to strengthen collaboration. The team also need to agree how they will exchange ideas, seek assistance and solve problems once they have returned to their own countries. This will help to build team cohesiveness.

Such a meeting would be most effective if carried out in a workshop environment. The emphasis needs to be around team building and should use a variety of techniques that incorporate competition, creativity and fun. The sponsor of the project should be invited to meet the team, endorse the project, agree the output in terms of the more detailed plan and commit to their (the sponsor's) role and responsibilities.

Dealing with shared resources

The issue of how shared resources 'please more than one master' can play havoc with a project's deliverables. Often this is because the virtual team member tries to cope with a number of potentially conflicting jobs with the result that none are done properly. The project manager needs to build a reporting environment of trust where early flagging of problems is encouraged.

The line managers and other interested parties who have a 'call' on the time of your team members are in fact legitimate stakeholders in the project and need to be treated as such. Reports highlighting achievements, issues and warning of risks must be presented to all stakeholders at agreed times in accordance with the stakeholder and/or communication plan. An agreement should be reached on how to deal with potential resource conflicts should they arise. By binding the stakeholder through his resource(s) in this rather visible way there is a lesser chance of resource conflict.

Managing the project

Having spent the investment in time and money setting the team up it is important that it delivers against its objectives. There is a tendency to want to micro-manage which is counter-productive.

Develop trust and prevent bottlenecks by delegating. Members of an international project team could be working while others sleep - it is important for the team to leverage off this advantage by tasking work accordingly. Communication of progress and in particular successes is essential to reinforcing the commitment of the team and the stakeholders in a virtual environment. Addressing issues of non-performance in the manner agreed under the team contract is necessary as the team will want to see deal fairly and speedily with such issues. Any changes to the project plans, business case etc. should be communicated and agreed with the team where possible and the project then re-baselined.

Sensitivity

This is about realising that the team (especially those on the fringes) may well be doing work over and above their normal jobs. The project manager needs to be aware of this when setting tasks and monitoring results. It is also about being sensitive to cultural differences within the team while keeping the overall performance of the project in mind. Some of the more common cultural issues might be around:

- Performance. Some cultures thrive on praise and 'stroking', others are driven by criticism while others still will take criticism as a 'loss of face' and become demotivated.

- Speaking up. Some cultures will not raise issues or risks for fear of criticism and will require different techniques to bring these to the fore. It is crucial to build an environment of trust to reduce the chance of surprises occurring in the project.
- Working patterns and holidays. Working hours and the working week can vary from country to country. In some cultures certain holidays are much more important than others. It is important for the project manager to take these facts into account when planning, otherwise a rebellion could ensue!

Communication

In a virtual environment the ability to express yourself accurately is greatly reduced as you do not have the opportunity for face to face communication. Looked at in another way, there is an increased chance of your message being misinterpreted. One way to reduce this is to use checkpoints in communications to ensure you have been understood. Plan your communications putting as much emphasis on 'how do I want to deliver this message' and 'how will this message be received' as 'what message do I want to deliver'.

Communication has to be a two-way process so beware if it has become a one-way transmission. Someone out there could not be in agreement, but does not feel confident enough to say so. For some of the virtual team the regular communications might be their only link to what is happening in the project. It is important therefore for the project manager to keep to the agreed schedule of communications even if it is just to sign in and take questions from the team.

It is better to have shorter and frequent communications. Plan your communications to make it easy for everyone to be present not only one or two to suit your convenience. Rotate the inconvenience if necessary – it will be appreciated.

Conclusion

Managing virtual teams across geographies is becoming more and more common in today's world of projects. It is suggested in this article that the benefit of aligning everyone at the beginning of the project and gaining team commitment will save a great deal of time, money and effort later on. Involving the stakeholders in the successes as well as the issues helps to keep their active involvement and reduces potential conflict.

Successful delivery across geographies can be immensely satisfying, but does need the project manager to think more around the 'softer' issues of cultural sensitivity and communication to get the most out of the team.

Transformis Consulting have extensive experience of setting up and running programmes and projects internationally. For more information on this and related services contact David Loveless via e-mail david.loveless@transformisconsulting.co.uk or phone (0) 20 7902 1152 or visit the Transformis Consulting website at www.transformisconsulting.co.uk