

Strategic Project Management in a Global Economy: **Best Practices in Managing Geographically Dispersed Project Teams**

By Neil Stolovitsky

In a world where cloud and mobile technologies have eliminated the barriers of communication and collaboration across borders, oceans and time zones, project-centric organizations are increasingly mining the world for the best talent to deliver quality goods and services. In turn, this new global economy has created a more competitive environment where businesses are required to deliver superior products and services to more demanding customers at lower margins. In light of this reality, project-driven organizations must continuously improve their global strategy to maintain their competitive edge and remain profitable.

This article will examine the unique challenges confronted by project leaders and their dispersed teams and stakeholders, and the strategy required to effectively drive projects to success.

Global Challenges in Project Management

Probably the biggest challenge project leaders face in managing a global team is the cultural diversity of team members and stakeholders who are working in multiple locations. It is not uncommon for remote teams to not have regular contact with their project lead. To complicate issues further, language and cultural barriers can create unclear expectations for all parties involved. As a result, challenges in effective communication and the sharing of timely information can be stalled or hindered, thus impacting a project's success. In many cases, global project teams and their leaders are making critical decisions based on second-hand or miscommunicated information.

The other challenge project leaders face in a global environment is the common application of traditional project management techniques to their global reality. In general, traditional project management methodologies focus on planning and tracking the details of timelines, specifications and costs. The methods of communication and sharing of information tend not to be formalized and are left up to individual project management practitioners to employ their own style of communication among stakeholders. Traditionally, project managers were fortunate to have primarily local face-to-face interactions with their teams and customers. However, with the globalization of business, the luxury of face-to-face communication among project teams and their stakeholders is limited. Long distance interaction has led to miscommunication that has negatively impacted project timelines and results.

Developing a Global Communication Strategy for Success

The first step an organization should take to address the unique needs of a global project team is establish a formal communication strategy to minimize barriers in exchanging, sharing and interpreting information critical to a project's success. This strategy needs to include the global team's buy-in and requires the necessary tools to effectively implement the proposed steps to better improve collaboration.

When developing a global communication strategy organizations should consider the following characteristics unique to global projects:

- 1) **Distance** – Global projects mean dispersed teams and stakeholders. As a result, face-to-face interactions will be limited. Developing a strategy where face-to-face meetings are scheduled periodically will ensure better team cohesion and more quickly address bottle necks and other performance issues. The fact is nothing can replace real human interaction that will keep leaders, stakeholders and team members grounded in reality so setting aside time for these meetings is critical.
- 2) **Language** – It is common for global teams to work in multi-lingual environments. Language barriers can result in delays and the relaying of inaccurate information. Finding a standard language of communication is critical, and where this is not possible, appointing a lead resource to address translation will improve communication.
- 3) **Business Culture** – Especially with global teams, leadership and work styles will vary. These styles must be recognized and addressed so that the entire global team can maximize performance and leaders and stakeholders can establish similar expectations when encountering issues.
- 4) **Time Zones** – Working with international teams will result in activities and issues emerging around the clock. Project leaders need to design a strategy where regular strategic meetings include a group of selected key members to relay the overall goals and objectives to their respective regions. In addition, these regional representatives can act as the conduit of information from their regions to the global leadership.
- 5) **Access to information** – More than any other project environment, a global team's access to information can be the most challenging. In many cases, global project team members and stakeholders do not have the luxury of walking over to their colleague's desk to ask questions. Consequently, a formal strategy documenting project details and providing the means to readily access information 24/7 is critical in effectively moving a project on a successful path.

In the final analysis, due to the obvious communication barriers inherent in globally dispersed teams, global projects demand a more formal process not only to ensure a project remains on track, but more importantly, to create a fluid and cohesive group dynamic that is constantly at risk when exchanging information that will ultimately impact the success of a project.

The Cloud is Your Friend!

With cloud computing permeating every aspect of the business world, the common challenges faced by global project teams are quickly eroding. Cloud technology has empowered global teams by providing the ideal collaboration platform to establish a formalized communication strategy consolidating project information under a single roof. Whether organizations choose to deploy an on-demand solution or implement a cloud platform behind their firewall, the ubiquitous nature of the internet has provided the most optimal platform to improve global collaboration, thus allowing mission critical information to be both accessible and mobile.

Beyond the obvious access of information, cloud-based project and portfolio management solutions can also deliver the necessary tools to control the flow of information. It is one thing to provide ease of access; it is something else to have the ability to map a global team's business processes across multiple locations with the appropriate security profiles. The right cloud based offering will deliver the most relevant information to a globally dispersed project team so that timely decisions and improved results will be experienced by all project stakeholders.

Although global projects can pose unique challenges of communication and decision making, for many organizations the advantages of leveraging global talent can deliver an added value to their portfolio of projects. The facts are, with the accessibility and affordability of mission critical information over the web and a more competitive global talent pool, today's organizations are leveraging these economies of scale to deliver better results to their customers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Neil Stolovitsky has over 12 years of IT experience with end-user, consulting, and vendor organizations, along with extensive expertise in business development, software selection, and channel strategies. He has published numerous white papers and articles covering Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) for service industries, Project Portfolio Management, Professional Services Automation, IT governance, and new product development to a global audience. Neil currently holds the position of Senior Solution Specialist with Genius Inside. To learn more about Genius Inside go to: <http://www.geniusinside.com/>.