

Virtual Meetings on Distributed Teams – Summary

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Virtual and multicultural teams are nothing unusual nowadays. More and more often we work in distributed teams, especially within the IPMA and Young Crew association. But do we know how to manage such teams in a good way, to get the best out of them?

Young Crew Poland organized a series of online meetings to talk about these issues and to learn the perspective of experts on virtual teams. Four online meetings were organized, with 10 experts, who shared with us their knowledge and experience with distributed teams:

1. Bartosz Woliński, Philips Lightning, IPMA Poland
2. Bikash Dhar, Lantiq A GmbH, Young Crew Austria
3. Dominika Walec, Education for Entrepreneurship, IPMA Poland
4. Glória Costa, Communication Designer Freelance, Young Crew Portugal
5. Grzegorz Szałajko, Systemic Excellence Group, IPMA AMBo
6. Krzysztof Bogucki, AMG.net
7. Małgorzata Krakowian, ACC CYFRONET AGH
8. Małgorzata Kusyk, Thomson Reuters
9. Maria Simek, next level consulting, Young Crew Austria
10. Michał Rączka, Allegro Group

This article summarizes the most important topics that were discussed during our four meetings. It covers some of the challenges that we are facing in virtual teams and presents the advice of our experts.

First, we need to define what a virtual team is. During the e-Meetings experts introduced several factors, which define a virtual team. A virtual team has, like a collocated team, a common goal, that bonds team members. The characteristic component of a virtual team is the distance and/or time dispersion. We talk about distance dispersion, when team members are located in different buildings, cities, countries. Time dispersion is related to the allocation of team members in different time zones or time shifts. And it's important to remember, that we are dealing with a distributed team even if only one person is working apart from the rest of the team (a different location or time shift).

People who are forming the virtual team are also specific. A virtual project team is like an aggregation of individual entrepreneurs. Most people who are working in virtual teams, are freelancers and those who enjoy working this way. Each team member is their own manager and the relation between the project manager and team members is more like a partnership, than a standard supervisor-subordinate relation.

Due to this entrepreneurial nature, not everyone can work in a distributed team. A virtual team member has to be ready to accept the responsibilities that will be delegated to one -- the day-to-day motivation, work planning and control. One needs to be virtually mature -- which means, that one needs to feel good working virtual, with people that he will not see often and hardly know personally. Team members need to be self-reliant, being able to organize their own work, since working remotely means working alone for most of the time. They should also have high interpersonal skills, which will be helpful for maintaining good communication within the team. And they need to be motivated to work in this team and understand how much effort it takes.

Having in mind all these characteristics of team members, we can say, that the role of a project manager in a distributed team is slightly different than in collocated teams. The project manager is more a coach, and leader who inspires the team, rather than a manager, who's managing team members' work. The project manager has to set strategic goals, suggest main rules and then make sure that the team is heading in the right direction. Other responsibilities (like motivation, control, work planning) means that the project manager needs to delegate to each team member -- and has to have in mind, that nevertheless he can't lose control over the project team, its motivation and work.

Challenges

Managing collocated teams is challenging, managing distributed teams even more. There are many challenges that you will face in such teams -- most of them are the same as in collocated teams, but they are more intense, like in a magnifying glass. Experts during the e-Meetings mentioned several challenges, some of them are described further later in this article:

1. Communication
2. Cultural differences
3. Coordination
4. Control
5. Team building
6. Motivation
7. Knowledge transfer

8. Cohesion barriers
9. Hidden agenda
10. Time differences

Communication

The main challenge which we are dealing with in distributed teams is communication. Most of the communication in real life is non-verbal and this gets lost in telephone calls and e-Mails. Therefore, it's easier to have misunderstandings. High levels of interpersonal skills are helpful here, as well as the ability to be sensitive when writing an e-Mail (so that it won't be misunderstood and won't start a conflict).

The communication process itself is also important and has to be clearly defined at the beginning of the project. It's good to design the process together with the team, having in mind the team members' usual habits and preferences. It has to be ensured that the process is known and understood by everyone in the team.

Communication during meetings is another important topic. The team leader must make sure that everyone has the same understanding of all issues of the project (which may be difficult especially in multicultural teams). There are some methods that could help you work on this:

- paraphrase things
- visualize
- cross-translate
- structure the team and meeting
- set basic ground rules (for the team and each meeting)

Tools

The communication process is tightly connected to the topic of tools. It is important to use in virtual teams multi-channel communication -- and make clear rules which tool will be used for which kind of communication. Messengers are good for quick communication, where the answer is expected immediately. Telephone / Skype are good for communication of more people at the same time. For meetings summaries use e-Mails, which are the most common communication channel -- and as some suggest, the least effective one, since everyone gets a lot of e-Mails every day. You should also have something similar to Sharepoint, or a DropBox or an intranet, where you can store all documents and templates.

When preparing the list of tools for your project, keep it simple and use maximum 4 tools. Remember also, that more sophisticated tools are harder to implement in a collocated team and even harder in a virtual one. Therefore it's better to use tools that everyone knows already -- like Skype. Finally, don't forget that tools are just helping achieving the goal (instead of being the goal) and should make the communication easier -- but if the communication process is defective, tools won't improve it.

Relations

One of the most important things in virtual teams are relations between team members. A group of people will only be a team, when there will be relations between them -- and a project can be done only with a team, not a group of individuals, who get their tasks done. In virtual teams we need to put a lot of effort into building relationships; it's much harder than in collocated teams.

To build relationships, give a human face to the team. Organize a kick-off meeting, where everyone will meet in person. Although the team is virtual, it is crucial to meet at least once face-to-face. When you can't meet each other at the beginning, give the people a chance to know each other in a different way. Exchange pictures, a description of each team member. Prepare a form, that each person needs to fill out -- with information about their hobbies, music they like, stories from the childhood, where do they live, how do they work, etc. Prepare a meeting, when you introduce yourself to each other, give them an opportunity to show their face. Let people know of this process, so that they wouldn't be surprised, and help them preparing the presentation.

As a leader, you have to be persistent in providing the team tools for getting to know each other. When you can't make a meeting on-site, schedule a video-conference. If you can't have a good environment, find a way around it, overcome technical difficulties. Have no easy excuses!

During the project also strengthen relationships -- send out inspiring news, photo, a joke. Share personal experiences, make small talk during meetings. Try to introduce normal habits -- even social rituals -- to the distributed environment, like for example a virtual coffee break. Don't limit your contacts in virtual team just to work!

Control and coordination

As said earlier, in virtual teams we don't control -- we lead people and make sure, that they're going in the right direction. It's hard to control how and when team members are working, when we don't see them. Therefore, don't manage tasks and working time -- manage products, goals and deadlines. Assign tasks accordingly to the project schedule and each person skills and knowledge.

Have a clear plan of what and when will be done -- and follow the plan. Organize regular project summary meetings and when you have people from different time zones -- change the time of each meeting, so that everyone would have the chance to participate in the team meeting at a suitable time for them. Make a clear plan for each meeting and send it to the team earlier, so that everyone would be prepared for it. At the end of each meeting, schedule the date of the next one (it's much faster than via e-Mail).

You should also monitor the motivation of each team member. Although you should choose people, that are already motivated to work in a virtual team, sometimes different factors make the motivation collapse. If this happens, it is helpful to have someone on-site with the team member, who could help us during the crisis (a colleague, boss). But if you have the possibility, you should meet in person to restore the motivation.

Cultural differences

When we're talking about cultural differences, we are not talking only about differences between nations, continents -- also inside of a country, between professions, genders. The biggest impact of diverse cultures is that people may use stereotypes when thinking about other cultures. This is a big obstacle, which is easier to overcome in collocated teams, but in virtual teams it takes much more time and it makes virtual teams less effective. It's also an area of potential conflicts, because we tend to treat our own culture as the ultimate benchmark, as if only our views or habits are the right ones and others make things wrong.

What makes the diversity even more difficult, is the fact that all cultures are like icebergs -- you can't see the most important aspects of them. You can see just the top of it, so not only you don't see everything from the beginning, but also only some cultural characteristics, values, etc. will be eventually discovered, while others will remain hidden. But of course, you can learn about other cultures -- especially when you're the team leader. You should be prepared and know how every team member could perceive others in terms of cultural differences. Find out what differs in the understanding of the most common topics, like hierarchy, humor, truth, communication style. For instance, in Western cultures, like in Europe, people speak openly what they think and they speak up. In Eastern cultures, such as in Asia, people don't ask others what they think and they don't talk about this; and, they may not speak up, or don't talk openly about problems or difficulties.

On the other hand, diversity in a team is the best we can get -- it enriches the team, it's a terrible thing to waste it. The key thing is to understand various cultures, especially as a leader. Be aware, listen, have your mind open. There is a big impact of the leader in determining whether diversity will be a problem or an opportunity. If you hate differences, if they disturb you -- don't manage multicultural teams. If you will show the team, that you're a fan of diversity and you enjoy working with different cultures -- people will follow this path and they will enjoy discovering differences and opportunities in their team. As the project

manager, you also have to have an intuition on how to balance cultural (and not only) differences.

If you get familiar with the cultural background of your team members, if you get to know them as people and if you set base rules and encourage diversity and show what's special about everyone -- you're on track to succeed.

References & helpful links

http://iacis.org/jcis/articles/Reed_Knight_51_1.pdf

http://news.citrixonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Virtual-and-Superior_Operations.pdf

www.timeanddate.com

<http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/meeting.html>

<http://malgorzata.krakowian.com> [blog about virtual teams in polish]

<http://virtualteamsblog.com/> [blog in English]

<http://www.dialoguecafe.org/>

"For a German and a Finn, the truth is the truth.

In Japan and Britain the truth is permissible, if it doesn't rock the boat.

In China there is no absolute truth.

In Italy the truth is negotiable."

Richard D. Lewis "When cultures collide: Leading across cultures"

J. Lipnack, J. Stamps "Virtual teams: reaching across space, time, and organizations with technology"

Recordings from e-Meetings

1. Team building and control [in polish] audio: http://bit.ly/spotkanie1_audio
audio & video: http://bit.ly/spotkanie1_view

2. Risks in virtual teams [in polish] audio: http://bit.ly/spotkanie2_audio
audio & video: http://bit.ly/spotkanie2_view

3. Multicultural and virtual teams [in English] audio: http://bit.ly/emeeting3_audio
audio & video: http://bit.ly/emeeting3_view

4. Learn from the best! -- Examples of distributed teams/projects [in English]
audio: http://bit.ly/emeetings4_audio audio & video: http://bit.ly/emeetings4_view

About the Author



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Natalia Majcher is a member of IPMA Young Crew. She graduated from Gdansk University of Technology as MEng in Management. Currently she is working in an IT consulting company in CRM implementation projects. As a member of Young Crew Poland Natalia is part of various projects on national and international level, both as a team member (GeCCo, Global Young Crew Workshop), initiator and a project manager (e-Meetings). Questions and feedback are highly welcome via natalia.majcher@gmail.com

About IPMA Young Crew

IPMA Young Crew is a key component of IPMA's growth and development of the leaders of tomorrow. We are an active network of young professional project managers and students aged 25 to 35 who believe in community and the building of a worldwide young professional project management family. With over 20 member countries, IPMA Young Crew strives to provide experiential learning through interaction and information exchange with young project managers. More information at <http://ipma.ch/young-crew/>.