Participants were asked to mark all the challenges of virtual working that they found applied to their situation and to comment on what they personally found difficult when working virtually. "Engaging remote participants" stood out as the main challenge, ticked by 76% of the survey takers. Next on the list as challenges were a group of comments, all rated similarly:

- Missing out on dynamics and nuances of conversation (58%)
- Working across time zones (56%)
- Working across different cultures (56%)
- Building trust (55%)

These are key issues for project leaders, especially when dealing with the minute details of projects. The next grouping included:

- Monitoring work done (47%)
- Different understanding of the same term or word (44%)
- Detecting and dealing with conflict (42%)
- I don't get to spend much time with remote people and so I don't know them as well as local team members (42%)
- Working across different languages (41%)
- Using technology (41%)

The survey then asked what were the things that made virtual teams work together more productively. Answers were free form and the most popular answer by far was meeting up face-to-face, either once at the start of the project, once a year, or more regularly. Other common suggestions included:

- Regular, clear communications, without lengthy gaps in between
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- The use of meeting agendas
- Being clear about how the team will work together in meetings … and overall
- Shared vision, outcomes and sense of purpose

- An open team culture, with each person listened to and able to ask for help from the others
- Time to get to know each other and build rapport and trust
- Understanding each team member's perspectives and how they prefer to work
- Technology should be easy to use and up to the challenge
- The use of video over audio alone
- Widespread use of screen sharing technology
- The use of a common repository that everyone can access easily

Interestingly, while some people preferred to use the telephone, others preferred to use instant messenger. Perhaps these people were from different generations? Other than on this point, the feedback was very consistent.

While going remote presents challenges, don't get discouraged. Thanks to ever-more sophisticated collaboration platforms, organizations can bring together workers in virtual teams in seamless new ways. There are plenty of tools to serve you, and we've gathered a "living" and "growing" list of do's and don'ts to help guide your way when leading virtual teams.

Do: Be patient when things get complicated. On occasion, working virtually can make it more challenging to explain complex situations. Be patient, and if your current communication method isn't working, be prepared to find another way to discuss the matter. For example, if email or messaging apps are creating long, drawn-out conversations with lots of misunderstandings, you might be able to cut through the noise more quickly and effectively with a phone call or video conference.

Don't: Forget about the human element of leading virtual teams. Virtual teams rely on technology to communicate, and while this is convenient, it's easy to lose sight of the human element, and for team members to be anonymous with one another. Yet that human element is critical in virtual teams because employees can easily become isolated and disengaged.

Spend some time getting to know your virtual team members (especially if they've been remotely onboarded) and check in regularly by phone or video call to talk about their work and encourage their professional development. Encourage your team to use video conferencing and add photos to their email accounts and messaging profiles to maintain a more personal touch.

Do: Manage your remote team's cultural differences. When leading a virtual team, your team members may come from vastly different backgrounds, cultures, and living situations. It's important to be prepared for communication challenges that may arise as a result of language barriers or differences in etiquette. To facilitate clear and respectful interactions between team members, it can be helpful to create a set of guidelines and share them with the team. REMEMBER to honor your organization's Cultural Operating System!

Don't: Overload team members with new technologies. New collaboration apps are being produced every day—but that doesn't mean you have to use them all. In fact, constantly switching from one platform to another or adding new apps to the mix can quickly overwhelm and frustrate team members. A better strategy is to find one powerful platform that offers all the features you need and provide all team members with adequate training and support to use it with ease. And if you utilize multiple tools, be sure to define expectations about how they should each be used.

Do: Help teams establish routines. While virtual work allows us to collaborate across time zones without the confines of a typical workday, it's important to acknowledge that having irregular schedules and unclear expectations can contribute to employee burnout, confusion, and poor performance. Make schedule expectations clear surrounding availability so your remote employees can plan their days as if they were in the office. The combination of flexibility and clarity empowers workers to plan their most productive days.

Don't: Forget to establish a virtual meeting protocol your team members can count on. Poor meeting practices cost U.S. organizations as much as $37 billion each year. Nevertheless, meetings are critical for collaboration and progress. Create a set meeting structure, along with a list of best practices, and adhere to it at each meeting. Make sure that everyone knows how and when to contribute to the conversation, and always ask for final thoughts.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Certainly, technology can help our ability to collaborate across time zones; however, even with all this technology, communication is tough compared to an effective face-to-face team, who can catch up with one another by walking over to each other's desks. Too often, feedback from colleagues is slow and communication is difficult. Without the instant feedback of body language, people are more likely to misinterpret information, which can lead to

misunderstandings in a virtual environment. Let's explore some additional best practices that will help project managers to become effective virtual leaders.

RUN EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL MEETINGS FROM THE START
Virtual team meetings are the core of great virtual teams and poor meetings really affect productivity. In the survey, the key challenge for project managers was engaging remote participants. Regular contact between remote colleagues will help them to feel part of the team, but effective, engaging meetings need more.

Clear ways of working agreed at the start of the meeting will help everyone to know how to work together effectively. Typically, these include stating your name when you contribute and making sure that people mute if they are in a noisy environment, so that everyone attending can hear well.

Another useful strategy for virtual meetings is to poll people. Polling means asking participants in turn for their comments. It really helps to inform your own participants at the start of your virtual meeting that you'll do this, as then people are far less likely to mentally check out and do other things.

SLOW DOWN TO SPEED UP
While it is tempting to race ahead, slowing down gives project managers the time to understand what's needed, what makes each team member tick, how things work, and what may help the team to operate seamlessly. It is really helpful to take time up front to build a team charter as a group and agree how the team will operate together, thereby avoiding many pitfalls ahead. A common vision and objectives, with shared goals and a strong purpose, will help team members to find their place and to work together with their virtual colleagues. By slowing down up front like this in a virtual environment, the team leader has set the foundations for the team ultimately to move on to more effective and speedier project delivery.

COMMUNICATE TO ENGAGE YOUR TEAM
Project managers are already familiar with the use of communications plans for stakeholders on their projects. It makes sense to take as much care in planning communications within their virtual teams. Based on the individual needs and preferences of each team member, this plan should also consider how team members interact during the course of project. It should cover technology too, both for virtual meetings and collaboration tools for sharing information and

storing documents. Ensure that the technology meets the requirements of the team and is easy to use. Helpful options include the ability to make recordings so that people can catch up if they miss meetings. Remember to gain input from your team and to update your plan as your project develops. Within your virtual work, it helps to use multiple strategies to engage people. Use stories, visuals, and pictures of team members' faces to help people to stay engaged.

BUILD INDIVIDUAL CONNECTIONS WITH YOUR TEAM

Part of your communications with your team will include one-to-one interaction with members of the team. Take time to listen to people's concerns and help them to overcome problems that they face. This will help people to engage with your project and priorities it amongst the many tasks they need to complete. It helps to build trust, both ways! Sometimes a personal touch such as a handwritten card to say "Thank you" can be very powerful at making people feel appreciated and part of your team.

USE VIDEO

A key challenge for people is "missing out on dynamics and nuances of conversation." One way to engage people and to gain as much of the body language and nuances of conversation as you can is to use face-to-face meetings whenever possible. These don't have to be collocated but can be achieved through video. This helps people to see what you mean and helps you to pick up as much of the communication as you can.

KEEP YOUR EYES AND EARS OPEN FOR CONFLICT

Conflict seems to be more likely in virtual teams than collocated teams, often due to a wider multicultural mix and geographical separation (Lui et al., 2008) (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). In collocated teams, it is easier to see a conflict emerging and to have a chat with the individuals involved to resolve the issues. In a remote team, unless the project manager is alert to conflict, it is likely to grow unnoticed and cause problems! While it can be tempting to ignore conflict and pretend it isn't happening, virtual conflict needs prompt attention, without which it will grow out of control.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT WHEN RECRUITING VIRTUAL TEAM MEMBERS BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION

Virtual project managers may be able to recruit team members from around the world, bringing in outsiders as well as internal resources. To be able to select the right person for the role,

project managers or their HR colleagues need to have a good grasp of the knowledge, experience, and personal characteristics needed for their team, as well as the specific skills that are needed. Look out for people who will be able to communicate well across cultures and will be flexible to work across time zones if you need this. It can be a good idea to have some reserves available too, to cover the risks ahead.

REMEMBER TO DEVELOP YOUR TEAM MEMBERS
For successful projects, it makes sense to help your team members to develop their skills for the future as well as for your own project. Know their current skills and their potential and seek to help them to realize and apply their talents.

4 More 'Do's' For Global Virtual Team Meetings

1. Clarify expectations for meeting attendees. This is especially important when global team members are drawn from both traditionally Hierarchical and Egalitarian cultures. If you want to hear from everyone, let the participants know—and consider calling on them individually to be sure you get everyone's ideas. This will help those team members who are accustomed to strict hierarchies understand that they aren't overstepping any boundaries. It can also help balance input between direct and indirect communicators; since those who value direct communication can sometimes overshadow those who tend to express their views in a more indirect way. Just be sure to explain your intentions beforehand, so people know what to expect. Be patient. The group will warm up to each other and communication will become more fluid after a few meetings.

2. Discuss how decisions will be made. Have you ever seen global team members flounder or fail to speak up during the decision-making process? Often, this is due to their uncertainty over how the decision will ultimately be made. Cultural differences can feed into this, making it even more difficult to come to a satisfactory resolution. Team members from group-oriented cultures, for example, will be more comfortable with a decision by consensus while those from more individualistic cultures may naturally expect the majority to rule or the group's leader to have the final say.

To ensure everyone knows what to expect, here are some key questions to address prior to the meeting:

- Will everyone's opinion be sought?
- Will decisions be made by consensus?
- Will the team leader make the necessary decisions, or will they be put to a vote?
- Once the team has reached a decision, who, if anyone, has the power to veto it?

3. Offer a polite way to interrupt one another. Interruptions are a natural part of any virtual meeting because the participants can't always anticipate when someone is going to speak since they don't have visual cues and can't see each other's facial expressions and body language. Likewise, if the technology begins to lag, an interruption can become unintentionally awkward. Prepare team members in advance by clarifying effective ways to politely interject. If the team leader will call on people, or if specific times will be set aside for questions and comments, let them know. Once attendees are prepared, they will know whether or not they should say "excuse me" or jot down their thoughts to raise later.

4. Provide a secondary means of communication. Offer a way for global virtual team members to ask questions, offer comments or solicit updates as the meeting progresses.

… And 4 Don'ts …

1. Don't ignore time zone differences. Keep in mind that when it's 10 am at your New York office, it's only 7 am in Los Angeles—and 11 pm in Singapore. Remember that you want your team members to be able to contribute their best, which is unlikely to happen if it is late at night or in the wee hours of the morning. If possible, alternate who must work late or start early.

2. Don't let the team go off in different directions. When a topic is only pertinent to certain members of the group, be careful to keep it short and take tangents offline. By keeping topics relevant, sticking to the agenda, and staying on time, the entire global team is more likely to remain engaged. If there are important subjects that only part of the team needs to discuss, deal with these at the beginning or end of the meeting, so others can join later or leave early and get on with their day—especially if it's already nighttime in their time zone.

3. Don't ignore multitasking. You may not be able to stop participants from checking their email but it's important to try to keep all team members engaged. If you believe someone is drifting, you can bring them back and refocus their attention by asking them their thoughts or opinion.

4. Don't forget to follow up after the meeting. Keep the momentum going by sending out a follow-up email or a shared document. It doesn't always need to be detailed meeting minutes or a long list of everything discussed. Ensure the team has a clear, unified understanding by keeping it simple and to the point: what was decided, what will be done, who will do it, and when.

Effective global teamwork is dependent on successful virtual meetings, since face-to-face conferences are rarely an option. While digital technology makes these confabs possible, their diffuse and impersonal nature presents a variety of challenges. These four do's and don'ts will help your global virtual team meetings run smoothly, keeping team members on track and the entire global team engaged.

IN SUMMARY

With the above tips as a guide, you can gain a deeper appreciation of the talents your virtual team members have to offer. Then, by combining those personal insights with patience, structure, and motivation, there's no telling how much your team can accomplish.

Sources:
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