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**GLOBAL
VILLAGE**

WORKING ACROSS INTERNATIONAL TEAMS

**SPEAK ANY
LANGUAGE**

WITH A BIT OF SASS

COMPLIANCE AND

**QUICK
ASSIGNMENTS**

**WEALTH
MANAGEMENT**

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IT TAKES A GLOBAL VILLAGE

**Best practices for working across
geographically diverse teams**

BY HEATHER LARSON

Assignees and the companies that send them to far-off locations know that working with people scattered across the globe comes with both unique opportunities and demanding challenges. Consider this task a wonderful adventure and the challenges a part of that quest, and meet them with an eagerness to learn and try new skills, a recognition of individual cultures, and a desire to empower your team.

Time zone conflicts and cultural differences go to the head of the class as issues that must be recognized and resolved from the beginning.

TIME ZONE SOLUTIONS

To stay connected and remain an integral part of the team by participating in meetings electronically, late nights or early mornings may be required for some individuals, says Sharon Michnay, CRP, SGMS, president of Relo Network Asia, a company that provides personalized destination services in more than 15 countries.

Roxanne Stehlik, GMS, senior global mobility specialist at Akamai Technologies Inc., agrees, “When working with employees and HR business partners in diverse locations, there are logistical challenges of finding a time to meet that works for everyone. It requires some flexibility on everyone’s part because the only reasonable time for a meeting may be when both individuals would usually be asleep or during other nonstandard working hours.”

An alternative, recommended by Utpalendu Chatterjee, international assignment manager for The Royal Bank of Scotland in Gurugram, India, is to record all meetings for colleagues who can’t attend so they can refer to them later.

Working around different time zones, although challenging, pales in comparison to dealing with the nuances of other cultures.

EMBRACE CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Michnay concedes that her organization, with one location in the U.S. (Chicago) and the rest in Asia, is not one of the biggest companies among Worldwide ERC® members. Because Relo Network Asia has eight different office sites, she says, keeping everyone engaged and capitalizing on their collective and diverse knowledge is complicated by geography.

Even within her small team, Michnay believes cultural differences are unavoidable. Among her employees, 20 different cultures are represented, and she emphasizes that substantial differences exist even between any two Asian cultures. All of them need to be considered, she says, to create a good team environment.

Carolina Ramos, GMS, corporate mobility leader for the Brazilian company G-Inter, says a team must create its own new culture that combines everyone’s values, considers and respects their differences, and does it all in accordance with the team’s purpose.

“Some challenges are inevitable,” says Ramos, who deals with G-Inter Alliance members all over Latin America and agents and partners around the

“A ‘no-surprise’ approach seems to be what works best across cultures.”

— ROBERTO VALE, GMS

world. “But when the methods and expectations are aligned, troubles are also mitigated.”

When a project’s objective is strategy-related, Roberto Vale, GMS, vice president, account management, for Asia-Pacific and the Middle East at SIRVA, says the challenge is around cultural sensitivity and trust. This means the leader needs to understand and articulate different points of view and to ultimately secure buy-in and ongoing support from all team members. A best practice, he suggests, is investing time in one-on-one conversations with participants outside the standard project calls.

Not everyone experiences all these issues with the same intensity, but everyone can take advantage of certain tech tools to “shorten” the distance between team members.

STAY IN TOUCH USING TECHNOLOGY

There are a million ways to connect these days, but the key is to choose safe and secure systems and make sure everyone on your team has access, says Michnay. Her team works on several shared, secured systems that they can log onto from anywhere without regard to time or location.

At Relo Network Asia, Michnay uses Skype for Business to hold conference calls. Features of this Skype program include scheduling and recording meetings, and it can accommodate up to 250 attendees. She’s also found WhatsApp useful for conferencing, for SMS text messaging, and for fast-tracking an individual’s attention. “When you wake up to 80-plus emails, having a system that highlights what’s important is critical,” Michnay says.

The company is also in the early stages of testing Microsoft Teams, a center for chatting, video calls, notes-tracking, and apps all in a shared workspace.

In India, Chatterjee has leveraged Cisco WebEx, Skype, Zoom, GoToMeeting, Yammer, and Workplace by Facebook, all of which can be used for videoconferencing and group collaboration. “But having real face time is the best thing to do while you work in global teams and across geographies,” recommends Chatterjee (see “The Value of Face Time,” at right).

Even though in-person communication is preferable, Stehlik says videoconferencing provides the opportunity to read body language and facial expressions. Seeing one another, even on a screen, helps clarify communication and builds relationships in a way that phone calls and emails can’t, she says.

Akamai Technologies also employs Smartsheets, Google Drive, and a global intranet that covers immigration and mobility-related policies, practices, resources, and FAQs.

No matter what apps or ways to meet you choose, Syd Smelt, global mobility relationship manager for the bank HSBC, favors regular catch-up calls to make sure everyone has a clear vision of what is happening. The phone is also one way to promote team building and ensure all team members know they’re valued.

FOSTERING TRUST FROM A DISTANCE

Many ways exist to instill both emotional connectivity and trust, and to keep the team from fracturing.

“One of my mentors told me that trust is built by ‘telling others what you intend to do, doing what you said you were going to do, and promptly confirming when it has been done,’” says SIRVA’s Vale. So, keep your promises. “A ‘no-surprise’ approach seems to be what works best across cultures, based on my experience in mobility,” Vale adds.

Investing in face-to-face meetings also builds trust. Vale says it becomes a powerful initiative when team members converge at a single location and create shared memories. “In my opinion, there’s no direct correlation between distance and trust,” Vale believes. “The latter is a product of good leadership, whether the group is local or global.” Further, Vale suggests it’s the responsibility of the project leader to scan, filter, and address behaviors within the group that undermine the belief in unity of purpose.

“Don’t expect everything you do to work immediately and be perfect,” cautions Chatterjee. “Seek out

THE VALUE OF FACE TIME

Using the internet to research the differences between your culture and those represented on your team makes a good first step. Although not foolproof, websites exist that measure different aspects of certain cultures.


Still, face time has one of the strongest impacts on success, says Sharon Michnay, CRP, SGMS, president of Relo Network Asia in Chicago. “And not just visiting the home office, but having time together both working and playing,” she explains. “Many cultures in Asia value personal relationships highly, but the in-person connection is important for every culture.”

It is those relationships that make dealing with the challenges of different cultures and languages much easier, Michnay says.

Do you sometimes browse social media or other websites during virtual meetings? When those same meetings are held in person, usually everyone is present and engaged. So, although advancements in technology are valuable, physical interaction with all its nuances, including tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions, is still the best way to connect—whether you’re all in the same building or spread out across the globe.

signs of conflict, like tonality in emails.” If a colleague usually uses emojis but suddenly stops and moves to monosyllables, that could be an early sign of conflict or frustration.

To prevent a hostile situation, Chatterjee tries to focus on a healthy and transparent work culture. Regardless of where they are located, he says, it’s



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imperative for colleagues to feel valued, engaged, and trusted at all times.

Besides the overarching cultural variations, Smelt says everyone’s personal culture is also different. Ensure that all individuals feel they are being heard, feel trusted, and are considered an integral part of the wider team.

Ramos suggests incentives, although not every team member will be motivated by the same ones. “It can be as simple as an email of thanks or sharing someone’s success with other team members,” explains Ramos. “Make sure everyone knows their actions will impact the growth and development of the team.”

Building two-way trust is a big part of successful leadership of any team.

THRIVING MANAGEMENT STYLES

Ramos has boiled it down to one powerful sentence: “As a leader, you need to open your mind, overcome your limiting beliefs, listen to your team members, and give them the same treatment you would like to receive if you were a team member.”

Ways of management should change according to the situation, Vale suggests. In most cases, fairness and respect are the leadership traits that tend to be most successful across cultures and in different languages (see “Speak Any Language With a Bit of SASS,” page 46). But in extreme circumstances, leadership needs to be decisive and conclusive. And in a

third scenario, he says, a manager needs to take a step back and nurture. On a day-to-day basis, the leader should sustain clarity of the goals, provide access to resources, and remove obstacles.

And don’t forget to include the manager’s culture in your discussion, reminds Michnay.

A COMMON GOAL

There’s more than one way to handle the many differences that affect the work of global teams, and we’ve looked at the best practices of a scattered sampling of relocation professionals. Chatterjee sums up the underlying sentiment: “To create a successful virtual team engagement, one needs to hold each other’s hands as one global team and embrace the cultural differences to nurture diverse talent for a common goal, considering the world as one global village.” *M*

Heather Larson is a freelance writer in Tacoma, Washington. She can be contacted via mobility@theYGSgroup.com.

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