

Managing Projects With Remotely Located, Geographically Distributed And Multicultural Teams

Krish, the program manager wakes up at 5 am in India and checks his emails. He is to make a steering committee presentation in the next two days; one of his concerns is the decision to be taken to address identified risks that are beyond acceptable risk threshold of the program sponsor. The leads based in New York, Germany and China, of all his three program tracks that were impacted, had to deliberate and agree on the most effective response plans to address these risks. He was expecting minutes of the meeting document to review their recommendations on how these risks could be adequately addressed.

Krish does not see any emails from the team and wants to know the status of the risk response plans. He wants to have a quick conference call with his leads to discuss quickly and agree on what he needs to present to the steering committee; especially on those high exposure risks. His leads in New York and China are not available; discussing with track lead at Germany alone does not provide the holistic perspective. He sends out a meeting invite for a suitable time the next day but is concerned that delay can impact the quality of decisions to be made.



During the meeting, the following day, the track lead in China is hearing these risks for the first time and mentions he needs to discuss this with his technical architect to come back

on what could be done to mitigate the technical risk. Based on his response plan, all the three track leads need to re-work their individual tracks schedules to present the reworked program schedule to the steering committee. Each of the track lead needs their team involved in re-planning the schedule which happens at their respective day time. As they are all in different time zones, Krish is worried he will not be ready with his recommendations for presentation to the steering committee on time. Frustration is building up as re-planning and decision making is taking way too long and seems inefficient.

What do you think went wrong in this scenario? Does this sound familiar? What could have been done better?

The Challenges

More and more organisations are moving into a matrix-based delivery model - working with culturally diverse teams, across geographies - leading to unprecedented operational challenges while executing Distributed Agile and Cloud-based projects.

The PMI-EEF (Excellence Enabler's Forum) team was formed with the objective of developing guidelines and best practices for project managers to manage efficiently IT projects spread across different geographies, time zones, and cultures.

About PMI Excellence Enabler's Forum (EEF)

PMI India took the lead in 2013 to form an industry forum, the Excellence Enabler's Forum (EEF), of senior professionals invited from various organizations in India who are keen to leverage project management for business results.

Currently 32 organizations from IT services, products, the public sector, and infrastructure are part of this forum. The team comprises of project managers, program managers, senior project managers, general managers, delivery heads, and senior directors from organizations such as Infosys, TCS, ITC Infotech, Syntel, Thomson Reuters, Wipro, IBM India, SAP, HCL, Intel, Deloitte, Unisys, and Cisco Systems.

EEF also serves as a platform for thought leadership to enhance project management maturity and build a project, program, and portfolio management networking group.

EEF has industry specific focus groups for IT services and products to identify major challenges related to project and program management.

The Ten GLOBAL Rules For The Global Manager

The PMI-EEF Project team brainstormed internally to list the common challenges from their collective experience in delivering projects. This was followed by a survey across project managers from various organisations to seek their inputs to prioritize the top challenges. From the survey responses, the team identified the top ten focus areas.

1. Expectation Management
2. Cultural Sensitivity and Virtual Teams
3. Effective Communication & Collaboration
4. Project Governance
5. Knowledge Management



6. Project Planning and Tracking - choosing the right tools
7. Leadership Skills
8. Processes and Methodologies
9. Technology
10. Other Best Practices

Having identified the problem areas, let us now go back to the scenario discussed earlier (with Krish) and see how it could have been managed better.

Expectation Management

Krish was expecting the agreement on the most effective response plans to address these risks from his key leads in New York, Germany and China. Considering geographically distributed & culturally diverse teams, he should have communicated the expectations and impact clearly to his leads.

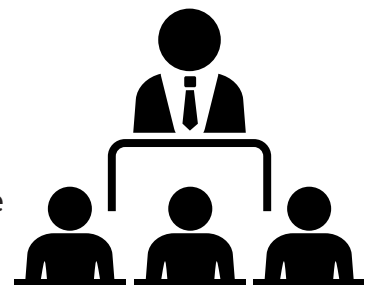
In global virtual teams, it is imperative to establish clarity on the structure, roles, scope of work, process and goals and a time bound feedback mechanism within the team.

- Transparency works very well for the virtual teams. Encourage and ensure the team is proactive in communicating good and bad news.
- Establish powerful intuition and listening skills. If a stakeholder has poor communication skills, ask him/her to repeat the key takeaways after you have shared them.
- Analyze stakeholder feedback within the core team to keep them on the same page.

Cultural Sensitivity

As the German team did not provide a complete analysis of risks and mitigation plans, Krish realized that there was a need to plan explicitly and discuss the availability of the key team members before the deployment

Cultures differ enormously when it comes to decision making. The project manager needs to understand the differences in native cultures, work styles, beliefs, practices, defined standards, variations in maturity levels of processes followed in different geographies, working days and timings in the country/place various teams belong to and build camaraderie among team members across locations.



- Have inclusivity and in-depth multi-cultural training for managers and team members at an organizational level. These programs must include modules on basic information about countries, climate, food habits, greetings, a few basic sentences in different languages, acceptable and unacceptable workplace behavior, common likes and dislikes etc.

- Take time to learn and share with the team how things would work in different geographies.
- Hold virtual office hours by being online, being available on the phone, and being available at regular times.

Direct and Indirect Communication & Collaboration

Krish didn't see any emails from the team and wanted to know the status of the risk response plans and to have a quick conference call with his leads to discuss, especially on those high exposure risks. His leads in New York and China are not available; talking with track lead at Germany team does not provide the holistic perspective.

Communication in some cultures is typically direct and explicit. The meaning is on the surface, and a listener doesn't need to know the speaker personally or the context to interpret it. This is not true in many other cultures, where meaning is embedded in the way the message is presented.

Undoubtedly, effective communication is very vital to successful project management - it is the art of managing different mindsets since different parties in the communication process can perceive the same subject in different ways. Specially, virtual teams may arrive at very different conclusions from the same set of details due to the differing patterns of perceiving and reasoning.

- Know your team members and create the sense of a "Team" by ensuring they are "joined at the hip"
- Standard set of objectives, goals, and vision statement is imperative in virtual teams. These objectives and goals have to be shared and discussed at regular frequencies
- Allocate tasks clearly and avoid any ambiguity to avoid issues between the team members.
- Use team meetings, newsletters and other forums to encourage active participation from team members



Project Governance

The lead in China heard the high exposure risks for the first time and mentioned that he needed to discuss this with his technical architect to come back on what could be done to mitigate the technical risk.

Managing virtual project teams becomes very challenging when there is no or little clarity in roles and responsibilities of the team working on the projects, and/or there is no clear escalation path defined for the project.



- Encourage face-to-face team interactions during kickoff in projects of long duration where there is a fixed budget for travel.
- Set up video conferencing or telepresence facilities if face-to-face communication is not practical or not feasible on a regular basis.
- Define specific roles and responsibilities within the team through the RACI (Responsible/Accountable/Consulted/Informed) matrix or other similar tools.

Knowledge Management

Based on China Track Lead's response plan, all the other three track leads need to re-work their individual track schedules. Each of the track lead needs their team involved in re-planning the schedule.

They apparently lacked the ability to leverage fully the existing information & knowledge that existed across the locations, including risk management knowledge.

In most cases there is no standard mechanism to mine knowledge uniformly across locations. Coupled with lack of face-to-face interaction, and cultural variances, this can be a major deterrent.



- Implement a common Knowledge Management (KM) system and encourage employees across the organization to contribute to a central knowledge repository as a part of their work process.
- Create a structure and mechanism to leverage knowledge across locations through the KM system.
- Ensure the knowledge is being effectively shared with others in the virtual team through communication tools such as mailing groups, newsletters, online tools, wikis/ blogs, and intranet.



Project Planning and Tracking

Krish has the mitigation call a day later (due to the time difference) to discuss and agree on what needs to be presented to the steering committee. Due to the last-minute planning of this meeting, key decisions could not be taken. Considering the diversity of the teams, Krish, as a project manager, should have identified milestones, planned key actions and decision points and risk mitigations earlier in the project.

The skill levels of remote teams are often assumed based on prior experience in estimating and managing as well as relying heavily upon inputs from those across geographies. Due to the lack of clarity about common objectives, standardization, resource-wise role and responsibility definition and processes, there may be significant differences in execution speed, scope, and planning.

- Align virtual team members' contribution to expected deliverables and milestones.
- Ensure use of standard planning tools and processes across various delivery centers/ locations. This will help arrive at task/milestone, and also handle risk and change management. It will also help overcome cultural differences, manage work and vacation timings - thus effectively manage virtual teams.
- Generate a buy-in and agreement from all team members on their assigned tasks in the project, along with their preferences, escalation paths, and a standard set of processes and tools for configuration, governance, and change management processes



Leadership Skills and Managerial Intervention



Krish and the leadership team across locations did not demonstrate adequate ownership and accountability of the deliverables. They were in a “wait-and-watch” mode, awaiting the instructions, rather than taking the lead. For instance, the team had not discussed the mitigations plans for the high exposure risks, which resulted in a delay for their presentation to the steering group.

“How do I lead people I don’t see” - virtual leadership requires additional competencies in making effective leaders. It is important that the domestic or regional leaders be clearly identified to take charge in the absence of the primary leader. Thus, in distributed teams, a distributed leadership approach may also need to be adopted.

- Manage conflict by providing equal opportunities across diverse locations, expanding the project into new locations, monitoring the performance of existing teams, and getting new teams to perform on par with existing teams, without causing a hindrance to client expectations.
- Spend additional time with the teams across locations to understand and not just assume what they want or know. They must place additional emphasis on coordinating with and motivating individuals who are separated by time zones and cultures.
- Ensure there are well-defined policies on diversity and inclusivity referred by the team regularly. It may be noted that leadership skills overlap with other focus area skills such as expectation management, cultural sensitivity, communication and conflict management.

Processes and Methodologies

Undoubtedly, in multi-geo projects, it is critical for teams to demonstrate consistency and maintain standards in their processes and methodologies to ensure successful execution and to let clients have a consistent view and feel of the project.

- Implement and ensure usage of strong process-driven systems/ dashboards to reduce manual intervention in process adherence, for e.g. integrated project management tools for tracking assignment, status, defect management, review tools.
- Establish strong handover processes between virtual teams to ensure the deliverables are handed over with continuity keeping the time zone and multicultural environments in mind.
- Provide joint process audits spanning locations to adhere to and align them to the defined processes, audits, governance and methodologies.

Technology

Krish's team needed a technology platform that had online updates without the need to depend only on email updates.

Similar to processes and methodologies, technology plays very vital role in managing virtual teams. For effective use of the technology and tools, it is imperative that the project team is trained on the usage aspects and have a strong technical support. Below are the list of commonly used tools in Indian organizations. These tools may be evaluated and chosen to suit the organizational and project context.

- Distributed development and deployment tools which support Application Life-cycle management activities such as IBM Jazz/Team Concert, Microsoft Team Foundation Server, Atlassian tools, facilitate distributed teams to work on various life cycle tasks. Cloud computing, social media and Dev Ops might help to reduce costs and automate development, and operations.

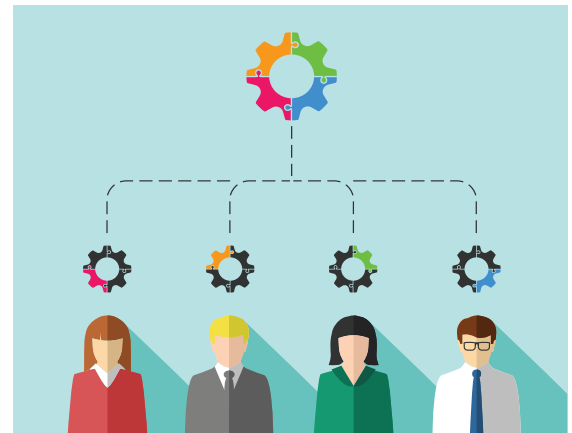
- Collaboration tools to help project managers to collaborate with virtual project team through a central hub for sharing information like Team box, Campfire, Active Collab, Huddle, Goplan, Team lab, Podio, Scadaplan, Lighthouse, Blackboard Collaborate, etc.
- Project management tools help in managing and planning projects with their distributed team through task assignments and scheduling, for e.g. Microsoft Project, Basecamp, Primavera, Wrike, Projecturf, Apollo, Brix, Teamwork PM, Red mine.
- Scheduling Tools that assist managers in scheduling a common meeting time with team members for e.g. Doodle, Time bridge, Schedule Once, and TimeandDate.
- Document Storage/ File Sharing Tools that help virtual teams to store and share files securely among themselves, for e.g. Drop Box, Google Drive, SharePoint, Box, One hub, Zoho Docs. Document Co-creation Tools that allow teams to co-create and co-edit documents or visuals in real-time for e.g. Google Docs, Prezi, Concept board, Scribbler, and Scriblink.
- Meeting Tools that help virtual teams to stay connected through Web conferencing and collaboration, for e.g. WebEx, WebConnect, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts, Connect, Anymeeting, MeetingBurner etc.
- High-End Video Conferencing Tools that allow meetings across virtual locations through super high definition or real size video conferencing, for e.g. Cisco Telepresence, Polycom Telepresence, and Logitech Life Size and applications like Skype, Speek, Join Me, etc.
- Instant Messaging Tools that allow virtual teams to chat in real-time, for e.g. Google Talk, Lync, WebEx Connect, Jabber, Same time, and Hip Chatalong with Social Network Tools that build a social platform for virtual teams to interact among themselves for e.g. Yammer, Chatter, Jive and WebEx Social.



Other Best Practices....

- **Rewards and Recognition:** Design an effective rewards and recognition program, which is fair, open, transparent, timely and objective, to motivate team members. Recognize both desirable behavior and positive project outcomes. Keep spot awards for those who go out of their way to finish a task or milestone, best practice awards, quarterly awards for best projects, best project manager award and so on.
- **Fun at Work:** Use gamification to improve people management and create a friendly and fun work environment. It is the process of game thinking and game mechanics in a non-game context with a combination of game designers, human psychology, technology, and social elements to make ordinary mundane tasks fun and interactive.

- **Commitment from Senior Management:** Set up an internal steering committee comprising of senior management representatives across locations to ensure key decisions are taken & executed with greater speed – briskly connecting talent and moving information and knowledge around the globe to fulfill organizational needs.



Important Take Away And Summary

The success of a project depends as much on the management of softer aspects of a project as it is on the hard, technical skills.

In the case of a virtual team, the project manager needs to pay significant attention to these softer aspects around communication, people management, and leadership. Together with the right amount of planning and monitoring, project methodologies, a strong governance structure, and suitable technology, projects with globally distributed teams can achieve success. Virtual teams need to explore using SMAC (Social Mobility Analytics Cloud) technologies/platform for getting desirable outcomes from the project.

These practices and learnings from distributed teams are very relevant in today's scenario of Distributed Agile, Cloud-based projects, etc.

Virtual teams are here to stay for companies to create the competitive advantage in the worldwide marketplace. Benefits of global virtual teams far outweigh the challenges & virtual teams working in harmony towards a shared vision goal is a win-win situation for all.

Being culturally savvy is no longer just "nice to have" but mission critical for building and maintaining a global competitive advantage.

Team

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