

DISTRIBUTED TEAMS



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With increased technology, globalization, international business, distributed teams are becoming commonplace in many work environments. By definition, a distributed or dispersed team “has members who are not located in the same place. Like virtual team or cross-functional teams, which can span organizational boundaries, dispersed teams also span boundaries. But their distances are measured by country, culture and time zones.” (Kossler, “What is a dispersed team” section) Virtual teams and global teams are common types of distributed teams, and while there are distinct differences between these specific types of distributed teams, this paper will focus on an overview of the challenges of and best practices for distributed team work.

When building any team, Verzuh suggests that there is a framework to create a high performance team, which includes positive team environment and collaborative problem solving components that is joined by a leadership component. The positive team environment includes ground rules, team identity, listening skills, and meeting management. Moreover, collaborative problem solving is comprised of continuous learning, conflict management, decision modes, and problem analysis. (Verzuh, 236) However, the formation of a successful distributed team faces additional challenges that aren’t covered in these components. Fisher contends that there are three characteristics to classify dispersed teams – time, space, and culture, which can be used to create a matrix of team types and degree of dispersion. On one extreme is the local team, comprised of the same time, same space, and same culture, with different time, different space, and different culture on the other, most dispersed extreme. (Fisher, figure 4.4) The five main challenges facing a distributed team are:

- “Managing cultural diversity, differences, and conflicts
- Handling geographic differences, dispersion, and despair
- Dealing with coordination and control issues
- Maintaining communication richness over distances
- Developing and maintaining teamness” (Marquardt, chapter 2)

Cultural diversity and differences are undoubtedly inevitable in a global distributed team. On a smaller scale, there can be business and workplace norms that vary dramatically between offices located in different parts of the same company, despite that there are not huge cultural differences between the team members. There are sharp contrasts in western and non-western values, for example, westerners value individualism, achievement, equality, informality, and assertiveness, while non-westerners value collectivism, modesty, hierarchy, formality, and indirectness. Other points of contention include and understanding of differences within the

team associated with leadership roles and expectations, individualism, communication, problem solving methodology, decision making, disagreement resolution processes, perspectives on time, degree of flexibility, and sources of motivation. While all of these points are complex, there is an underlying similarity; there is most likely a difference in viewpoint and norm on each that varies from culture to culture. (Marquardt, chapter 2)

Geographic differences can create trust and commitment issues arising from lack of face-to-face meetings. Also, large time-zone differences can make it difficult to make frequent or even infrequent team travel and often arrange a convenient time to arrange conference calls when multiple time zones are involved, so it can be difficult to create and keep a cohesive team on the same page. (Marquardt, chapter 2)

Coordination and control refer to completing objectives efficiently while meeting goals and standards, which is challenging since management may not be located on-site so they are unable to stop by to check on progress or provide advice to team members. This can cause a longer response time to solve issues and potentially team member loyalty issues caused by reporting to a local manager and a global team. The often large size of distributed teams further compounds the challenges since complexity increases as size increases. (Marquardt, chapter 2)

Managing communication is often challenging when high-context communication, which is often not literal and focuses on body language and other non-verbal cues, is involved. There can be cultural difference and conflict when one culture uses low-context, literal communication that focuses on the message itself and the other culture uses high-context communication. Even if both cultures are high-context, communication can be difficult over distance since the team will typically rely on phone calls and email to do daily communication, both of which do not provide an effective means for non-verbal communication. (Marquardt, chapter 2)

Finally, developing and maintaining teamness refers to the creation of a common bond and team identity when the team composition may highlight differences among the sub-teams at different sites rather than a focus on commonalities that will be instilled, such as project goals, valuing diversity, and team culture. (Marquardt, chapter 2)

If using a distributed team poses such challenges, one might ask why they are even used, but there are, in fact, reasons and situations where distributed teams are beneficial. Distributed teams can foster alliances between global organizations and potentially reduce costs, for example, those associated with production, operation, or product development. These teams can

also expand geographical market opportunities that would otherwise not be available without local expertise, perhaps due to lack of knowledge about a specific cultural niche. A dispersed team can foster global interdependence and allows people from different locations to work on a joint project. (Virtual Team, Wikipedia) Furthermore, more innovation and faster problem solving may occur within a team with diverse perspectives. (Kossler, chapter 2)

Fortunately, with an understanding of the challenges associated with distributed teams and some planning, there are ways to help form and sustain a successful distributed team. It is important to remember that basic team formation principles are also critical to any team, but these are especially critical to the distributed team. Without a strong team foundation, high performance is very difficult with a dispersed team. Team success can be created by “instilling teamwork values, establishing clear goals, selecting the right team players, developing key skills and developing team processes”. (Brown-Johnston, chapter 2) Five crucial team processes include “honest dialogue, effective problem-solving and decision-making processes, accountability, respectful relationships, and trustworthiness.” (Brown-Johnston, chapter 2)

The challenges a distributed team faces can be inventoried in order to determine where to focus team building efforts, whether the challenges lie with “bridges and boundaries, cultural and technological foundations, or aligning human resources.” (Marquardt, chapter 2, worksheet 1) This can be done with an assessing and ranking following ten statements:

- Incorporation of cultural differences in processes
- Awareness of difference cultural ways of communicating, leading, and working together
- Managing distance and time differences
- Recognition of isolation and interaction
- Balancing control and coordination
- Collaborative team work
- Understanding importance of verbal and nonverbal communication
- Awareness of technological communication channels
- Development and maintenance of teamness
- Trust among team members (Marquardt, chapter 2, worksheet 1)

According to Kossler and Prestridge, when building a distributed team, it is important to first gain organizational support and start the planning process, followed by establishing “purpose, goals, objectives, tasks, roles, authority, timelines, and performance measurements, and learning systems”. (Kossler, sections 1 and 2) Technology, including phone, email, inter/intranet, teleconferencing, videoconferences, and fax, is crucial to maintain communication

between team members in different locations. (Kossler, section 2) In addition, Verzuh points out that “long distance status meetings benefit from formality.” (Verzuh, page 280) He believes that using an open task report during these meetings will help address all issues and details while keeping team members on schedule since it is a tool that “acts as an agenda for progress reporting and near-term planning.” (Verzuh, page 279-280)

A project manager can also focus on building relationships among the team and providing leadership and management from a distance. Relationship building can be accomplished through initial and periodic face-to-face meetings, celebration of team success, linking members from different sites as mentors or work partners, and allowing for relationship building into every meeting agenda. (Brown-Johnston, chapter 6) Leadership and management problems within distributed teams can be addressed through a clear definition of roles, promoting personal accountability, immediate response to inappropriate behaviors, identification of where help and resources are, coordination of activities with all key players, and implementation of a performance management system with defined metrics. (Brown-Johnston, chapter 6)

Distributed teams will most likely never entirely replace conventional teams, but will surely continue to increase due to their unique benefits. As distributed teams continue to emerge in the workplace, a thorough understanding of team formation principles is required along with knowledge of potential challenges in distributed teams in order to create strategies to effectively overcome geographical and cultural distance obstacles.

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