The tyranny of distance

To efficiently deliver project outcomes, project managers need to bridge the gaps between members of their remote teams.

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GLOBALISATION MAY HAVE MADE THE world feel smaller, but project teams are becoming more scattered. Most project managers would have managed a project where some or even all of their teams worked remotely. Despite having a multitude of technological tools at their fingertips to allow workers to collaborate and share resources, remote teams still pose unique challenges.

Francis Norman, PhD candidate at Curtin University in Perth and Director at consultancy firm Ulfire, is investigating these challenges in his dissertation. His research has found that one of the most critical issues for remote teams is trust.

"The significant thing is how people build trust and how they maintain that trust between individuals, between offices and between groups," he says. "People will find ways to work around system problems, but the humanistic side – the personalities, [others] being perceived as a threat – is the biggest challenge."

Norman’s research examines the views and experiences of remote teams delivering engineering projects. He discovered that emotional commitment to a project, from both individual workers and stakeholders, could strongly influence project outcomes. This commitment develops when workers feel they have genuine, trusting relationships with their remote colleagues.

"People will go that extra mile if they feel it is being appreciated and reciprocated. They’re more likely to answer the phone after hours if it’s coming from another office, or they’re more likely to come in early and join a meeting," says Norman.

"Without an established level of trust between project team members, they appear less likely to communicate openly, [which] results in issues that could otherwise have been dealt with as a matter of course being left unaddressed until it is too late."

Trust issues

Building and maintaining trust is challenging, particularly in the absence of face-to-face interaction between team members.

"The challenge for the management of a remote team is to create a cohesion usually reserved for successful co-located teams," says Leh Simonelli, Chair of the AIPM Professional Development Council and former AIPM National Director. "The manager must create a tier of collaboration, productivity and communication that spans cultures, time and distance."

A 2010 global survey conducted by consultancy CultureWizard found that 73 per cent of workers viewed managing conflict in remote teams as more challenging than in face-to-face teams, 69 per cent thought making decisions was more difficult and 64 per cent believed that expressing opinions was not as easy.

As for the greatest hurdles to be overcome by remote teams, 81 per cent of respondents listed time zones, 64 per cent pointed to language, and 59 per cent cited holidays, local laws and customs.

The two latter responses highlight the cultural challenges common within globally dispersed teams, including one of Simonelli’s own. He is currently managing a major program for the International Project Management Association (IPMA) that involves individuals from approximately 20 different countries.

Managing such a team’s cultural differences requires effective and tailored communication that goes beyond

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adopting the latest technologies, such as groupware applications, email and teleconferencing.

“Video conferencing and teleconferencing are alright if the people are more or less of the same origin although settled in different countries, but if the remote team consists of multicultural groups belonging to different countries then there would be linguistic, cultural and communication barriers,” Simonelli says.

**A new kind of intelligence**

A lesson in cultural intelligence (CI) can help avoid cultural clashes that could jeopardise a project, as curious and open-minded project managers can use CI to build stronger relationships and establish trust within remote teams, Simonelli explains.

CI is related to emotional intelligence (EI), which has been scientifically linked to project performance. Among the researchers in this field is psychologist Daniel Goleman, who wrote the book *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman examined approximately 200 global companies and found that truly effective leaders are distinguished by a high degree of EI, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

Finding these so-called soft skills in a project manager is rare, says Norman, as many are hired purely for their technical abilities.

“Soft skills, human skills and communication skills are often not looked at when selecting people for technical delivery work, [which] can cause as many problems as a lack of technical skills,” he argues.

In the context of remote teams, a critical soft skill that project managers should possess is flexibility. This can be confronting to the purely technical types.

“On one hand you have to be able to maintain schedules and budgets, on the other you have to appreciate that the people who are doing the work for you might be working in a language they don’t understand and standards they’re not familiar with,” Norman says. “Everybody within the project needs to have a
Project managers should:
• learn about and respect Indigenous elders, cultures and customs.
• identify sacred sites and prohibited areas through community consultation.
• know what they should and should not do. For example, ensure police checks and permits are in place for all the contractors’ personnel prior to accessing the sites.