FAR-SIGHTED

Keep a close eye on the action, whether from across the hall or across the globe.

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No project team is without its issues, but things get even more complicated when people are working in different locations. When team members aren't together, assumptions and expectations can cause frequent miscommunications. People working remotely often feel isolated because they typically interact less with other team members. There's also usually less collaboration, and team bonding can suffer.

Despite the obstacles, virtual teams are a fact of life, and all the standard good project management practices still apply: establishing a charter, communications plan, detailed project plan, etc.

Here are some issues that are especially important when working with remote members. I expect that those who have managed virtual teams will quickly nod their heads in agreement as they make their way down the list. I've offered some of my own advice, but I'd challenge you to think about your own solutions—and if they're effective.

Talk with your team. From the start, draw on the ideas of everyone on your team for the best ways to collaborate. Then periodically survey the team for what's working well and what's not.

Set communication expectations. Think about accessibility while considering typical work hours for you and your team. What are reasonable response times to e-mails, for example? How will you handle status briefings and reports? Have you defined a conflict-resolution process? Be sure to establish ground rules for meetings, too. Learn to accommodate time-zone differences, create clear agendas, and keep meetings on track and as short as possible. Also consider having daily "morning" gatherings—5 to 15 minutes long—to help plan activities and stay on top of the most urgent issues.

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Define work rules. Team members must of course meet their established commitments and rally when necessary to support the project. At the same time, leaders must be respectful of off-work hours—no matter how inconvenient that may be with time-zone differences. Project leaders must emphasize the feeling that *we are all in this together*. They should also avoid putting themselves in the project's critical path so they can be available when members need them.

Take advantage of technology. Leverage video conferencing, instant messaging and collaboration software so team members can easily ask questions, access information and post status updates.

Build some team spirit. It's easy for virtual team members to feel separated. One easy fix is to create a members page on a project website that includes each person's picture, project duties, contact info, location and perhaps an item of personal interest.

Be sensitive to cultural differences. When working across borders, all members should be trained on social mores and aware of local human resources practices.

Monitor productivity. Remote team members are more at risk of saying they're on schedule and then surprising with a late deliverable. Require relatively frequent deliverables and artifacts to ensure work is being accomplished satisfactorily. Also, plan regular one-on-one check-ins and choose phone calls over e-mails whenever practical. For projects lasting six months or longer, consider having the health of the project audited by one or more people from outside the project every quarter or so.

Close issues. Commitments can more easily drift with remote teams. Ensure that concerns are addressed quickly, fairly and closed appropriately.

Put in some face time. When reasonable, make face-to-face visits to help improve communications and team camaraderie. Strive to bring the team physically together occasionally, either in small groups or all at once.

Praise, show appreciation and celebrate. Scattered teams can often feel out of the loop, so be quick to highlight individual and team successes. Include all project members in noteworthy celebrations when major milestones or events are achieved.

As the project leader, your job is to ensure the success of the project. Don't allow the adage "out of sight, out of mind" to prevail. PM

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