



DELEGATING TASKS ACROSS BORDERS

AN UNDERESTIMATED CHALLENGE

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Corporations have choices as to how they construct an optimal organization for each project and clearly different approaches have their pros and cons. Today it is becoming increasingly common to delegate tasks to geographically dispersed or off-shore teams. This is typically performed with one or more of the following benefits in mind:

- Hand-overs between different time zones can enable work to continue around the clock in response to tight deadlines
- Project costs can be reduced by leveraging lower resource costs in off-shore markets
- The utilization of staff within different units that are experiencing different demand levels can be balanced

As many have experienced, however, working across borders can bring with it associated challenges, some of which are highlighted in the example below.

A project based in Europe had a team working on project deliverables from 9.00 a.m. until 5.00 p.m. each day. At 4.00 p.m. they would hand over to a team of colleagues at their North America office that would continue to work on the development tasks. Then at 4.00 p.m. in North America the work would be transferred to a team in Asia that would take over for another 8 hours before subsequently handing back to Europe as the next day was beginning.

The project was conducted intensively, like a relay race. Some tasks involved the participation of team members from all sites. Other tasks, less suited to development by several resources, were split between the sites for parallel development. When producing a document, for example, each site was given the responsibility to develop a clearly defined chapter and then the chapters were assembled and reviewed as a cohesive deliverable.

Whilst this approach continued for several weeks and enabled an aggressive deadline to be met a number of challenges were faced. Seamless cross-site collaboration is harder to achieve in practice than in theory, which was reflected in the findings of a review conducted at the project's conclusion. Teams had to be very well synchronized. To achieve this level of synchronization some resources had to travel between project sites resulting in additional costs. Furthermore, a lot of time was taken up in the daily handovers. The project suffered from quality issues as re-work was required when remote teams had not understood their tasks correctly or lacked the skills to perform them. And from a practical perspective it was difficult to schedule phone conferences involving all three teams due to time conflicts.

This situation is clearly not unique. The interesting question is how to optimize performance when working in a geographically distributed environment. The following suggestions are based upon the lessons learned from a variety of multi-site projects:

Understand the Characteristics of the Remote Organization

As with any other collaborator in business a remote team or organization will have its own characteristics. These should be understood from the offset and considered carefully. Some off-shore organizations provide a high level of skill but with high associated costs. Others may offer less specialist competence but have the scale to deliver large projects cost efficiently. The speed of response offered by different organizations may vary, as may language proficiency. Think about how your approach should be tailored based upon these factors, the tasks that should be delegated and the style of engagement that will be required.

Assess the Impact of Off-shoring on the Client Experience

Many of the tasks that we delegate to off-shore teams require little client interaction, and any client interactions required are performed by a local on-site team. Keep in mind, however, that this will not fully shelter clients from a change in delivery experience, particularly if they are used to being supported locally. Some clients have described an off-shoring experience as 'the project disappearing into a black hole' and refer to very limited visibility of progress until deliverables are handed over. Off-shoring puts a greater load on the local team, and in particular requires them to be very good at reporting on progress 'behind-the-scenes', in order to create the same perception of progress and value.

Beware of Resource Churn

Some regions in the world experience much higher employee churn rates than others. Professionals working in mature markets have invested significant efforts in

bringing their off-shore counterparts up to speed regarding work procedures only to find that after a year they leave their positions and the assimilation of new resources has to start again. When setting up an off-shore collaboration ensure that the information exchanged is documented wherever possible and that re-usable assets are created. If you need to repeat the process this will minimize the efforts required.

Implement Lessons Learned Quickly

Working with a remote team will be a learning experience. Particularly during the early days pay attention to what works well and not-so-well and where misunderstandings tend to occur. Then use these lessons to improve efficiencies by adapting your approach and identifying work-arounds. Little will be achieved by following a procedure for 6 months and then stating that your collaboration has been poor.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Samir Parikh is a principal business consultant, practice manager, and consultancy CEO with over 25 years of industry experience. In 2000, Samir founded *SPConsulting* a global management consulting firm specializing in organizational strategy and change management.

With a track record of projects conducted in more than 50 countries the firm works closely with companies that are transforming into consulting-based organizations, delivering solutions and professional services in highly competitive environments.

FURTHER READING

Samir is the author of *The Consultant's Handbook*, published by John Wiley & Sons. This book provides a comprehensive guide for the practical implementation of consulting skills by professionals working in consulting and professional-services-related disciplines.

The book contains additional guidelines, examples and use-cases to support readers in implementation of consulting techniques, as well as practical tips and lessons-learned from real consulting engagements.