

# Leading – virtually



They've just given you a team of hundreds who mostly are gone to bed before you're logged in. So what are the secrets of creating real team spirit and effective leadership when your meetings literally straddle the globe, asks Gary Flood.

So this morning they promoted you to global CIO and the glass of champagne you permitted yourself at lunch is still fizzing

round your system pleasantly. Then they told you that as a result of an unexpected merger you now run a global team of hundreds of staff

in three different time zones and in at least two cultures you've no experience of. Time to hand back the promotion and scarpers?

The reality is that many IT leaders find themselves in just this sort of situation, especially in today's increasingly interconnected world, with the management of widely distributed, heterogeneous teams a necessity for a growing number.

## More than technology

While PowerPoint, email and instant messaging have always been part of the virtual manager's armoury, along with the good old daily international mass conference call, the rise of virtual collaboration tools such as WebEx and Microsoft Lync have created a new vision. Add a bit of telepresence, SharePoint, a soupcon of social media and all is well, surely?

The temptation is to assume that technology is all that is needed here. However, that is just where new virtual team managers make their first mistake, say both experts and veterans. It turns out that making a team work where it may involve individuals you're very likely to never meet in real life is a lot more complicated – and may even take formal training to get right.

'Technology can shrink geographical distances, yes. But it can't make people feel closer unless you work on that, too,' says Liz Timoney-White, learning giant QA's Learning Programmes Director for Professional Development.

'It's more than being able to see your face across a thousand miles,' adds Ian Mills, Chief Executive of performance improvement consultants Transform People International, a firm that has trained managers in just this issue for corporations like Cisco and American Express. 'It's also about etiquette, knowing that your "pants" is your American peer's "trousers" – and having real

**It's more than being able to see your face across a thousand miles**

Ian Mills, Transform People International

insight into some basics of human psychology and team dynamics.’

## Attention to context

That’s not to say technology has no role to play – far from it, it is central, as we’ll see. But practitioners counsel that attention paid to the context of whatever communication technology you will use is vital, or you’ll end up with a collection of people in different offices, not the global team you are aiming for.

‘Leading geographically dispersed teams effectively requires both technological enablement and some clarity on working practices that reinforce/support the required leadership style and team culture,’ warns David Smith, CTO and CIO for IT services supplier Fujitsu UK & Ireland. ‘In my experience, there is ultimately no substitute for having a team spend time face-to-face in the same location as that interaction enables the team-forming process. If you can’t do that, it’s still perfectly possible to create a high-performing team that collaborates and works smoothly together, enabled by technological solutions.’

‘As a CIO, it’s important to be able to inspire your virtual group and team leaders by providing clear and positive communication. But it’s vital to never become autocratic and misunderstand the difference between “business” and “personal” communication – both are vital to make this work. In fact, the best thing you can do, if you find yourself in this sort of position, is to go to the other extreme and start off by “overcommunicating”,’ adds Allan Pettman, UK MD of training firm Global Knowledge.

## Culture change

Indeed, Pettman’s company is, in the context of this article, not a supplier of training for CIOs in this position, but a case study, as he has to do this every day. Or rather, his colleague Kevin Addington, the firm’s European IT Director, who

manages a team across multiple regions including Europe and the Middle East, does.

Addington says that managing a virtual team has had a direct impact not only on the way IT systems are being managed, but also on the tools that are being used as part of everyday working life. The merging of roles is an inevitable consequence of smarter and more efficient IT systems – a cultural change aspect that needed careful handling to get accepted.

‘What would have originally taken a team of 14 can now be done by one person,’ Addington continues. ‘As an IT director, it’s important to be aware of the consequences and manage these changes effectively from region to region.’

Moving to a virtual team basis of over 750 staff has brought some inevitable challenges, he says – but has also made some outstanding contributions, prompting both organisational and team success.

‘From my perspective, flexibility is key, especially where new technology and regional differences are concerned,’ he explains. ‘That’s been revolutionary in bringing the team closer together and boosting morale – it’s as simple as walking

over to someone’s desk. The country managers and home workers now feel more connected to the office, which in itself has dramatically reduced communication barriers. For example, we recently deployed a cross-country IT team for an important system upgrade. Microsoft collaboration technology was key in creating a quick team dynamic, giving us agility and breaking down barriers in team discussions. As a result, we were able to deliver meaningful changes over a short implementation period.’

It’s worth pointing out at this point, by the way, that we’ve assumed that your difficulties will mainly lie in making people coalesce as a team who don’t speak English as their first language. However, actually there may be people who speak the Queen’s English and who work downstairs you also may find a bit opaque, as Fujitsu’s David Smith notes: ‘GenYers [young people between 16 to 25] do have a different set of expectations coming into the workforce and so present different leadership challenges – mix that with the stereotypes or cultures that value face-to-face interaction and it becomes an interesting skillset to mould all this into a high-performing team.’



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Kevin Addington,  
Global Knowledge

## Top tips for virtual management

‘Make your information environment as rich as possible. Regularly scheduled Skype calls, video conferencing and advanced mobile applications have made remote management a painless task. Our success is due in part to our superior technology, but mainly to the enthusiasm of our people. Here we have an intranet that links all our hundred developers with email, documents, PDFs, videos, sales engagement forms, CRM, down to people’s birthdays. It all helps to make people feel they are part of a real global family.’

– Helmut Reketat, Global Sales Leader at German IT security firm G Data Security

‘Processes and governance are also very important to make a global team work as one. Consistency and clear communication of what I expect from my 600 employees is vital. As leader, I think that’s very much part of what you have to reach out and establish from the start.’

– Mandy Edwards, CIO of Sitel, a global outsourced call centre specialist

## 'Overcommunication'

The task, then, is not just making sure all your team have as much connectivity software on their desks as they can to see other members via webcam, to share project resources and so on. It's also about putting a priority on people skills – what Pettman means by 'overcommunication'.

Expert virtual managers thus need to have – or need to be coached in and encouraged to develop – solid skills around awareness of self and others. 'It can be as subtle as taking time to explain the unspoken things in your office, as much as establish the lines of hierarchy and communication,' suggests QA's Timoney-White. 'When do people leave the office in London? Do people eat at their desks? If you're in Bangalore, that kind of thing can be very useful to know, as you'll know if you have any chance of finding someone at a specific time to ask a question. You may also need to be explicit that it's OK to ask your

boss's boss things, which in his culture may not be allowed.

'You need to think less about telling and controlling, basically, and think more about ways to foster genuine cooperation and sharing.'

So – no need to panic and run out of the building. You can manage that virtual team of hundreds in

## You need to think about ways to foster cooperation

Liz Timoney-White,  
QA

all those exotic parts of the world. But don't even start until you have assimilated some best practice on making bonds work through technology, boned up on some cultural awareness and acquired a commitment to make a real mini online community of your new team.

## Resources

Transform People International, based in Newbury, which specialises in learning and development consultancy in the areas of leadership, management, sales, collaboration and communication, says it recently trained 4,000 IT staff at Royal Bank of Scotland in remote working skills [www.transformpeople.com](http://www.transformpeople.com)

Confronted with the need to understand some of the subtler cultural clues of the way people work in other countries? You may find these sites useful  
[www.kwintessential.co.uk/cross-cultural](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cross-cultural)  
[www.worldbusinessculture.com/](http://www.worldbusinessculture.com/)

At least two organisations offer specific training and/or mentorship to CIOs faced with global team integration and leadership responsibilities. Go here for the QA course, but note that it tends to be run as a bespoke course, hence there are not many public dates:  
[www.qa.com/mpdlvt](http://www.qa.com/mpdlvt)

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