

Managing a Virtual Project Team

By Gary Hamilton, Jeff Hodgkinson and Gareth Byatt

Let's face it; virtual teams (where we work with colleagues in remote locations, be they close by or in different countries) are now a reality in the workplace. If this trend in the workplace environment continues, virtual working will increasingly influence the way we operate, and the 'effective virtual team worker' will be a valued asset. A key benefit to forming virtual teams is the ability to cost-effectively tap into a wide pool of talent from various locations. There are several definitions of the virtual team worker, but within the context of this article, we are talking about people who work on project teams and who display the following attributes:

- They work primarily from a particular office (maybe a home office, or maybe a fixed work location), and they are not expected to travel each week as a part of their job (i.e. road warrior) or be physically in the office on a daily basis.
- They likely work from home one or more days per week.

Most project managers with a few years of experience or more are likely to have managed a project where some or even all of the project members were remotely located. How different is managing a virtual project team from a co-located team? Are there additional considerations or risks involved in managing a virtual team? Before we answer these questions, one must first understand the dynamics of the virtual team worker.

Being a virtual team worker is not for everyone or every organization. A virtual team worker is more likely than the collocated worker to suffer from feelings of isolation if the set-up is not right, and they need to be more self-managing and focus their efforts in a particular way. In order to effectively manage their virtual project team members, the project manager needs first to understand how to achieve this. We contend that there are five primary aspects in which a project manager should direct their efforts to ensure effective project management of the virtual team:

- 1) Manage Goals
- 2) Manage Communications
- 3) Keep People Motivated
- 4) Regularly Assess the Effectiveness of the Remote Communications, and
- 5) Use Collaboration Tools.

1. Manage Goals: Setting clear goals and objectives are important in any project. When a portion of the team is virtual, this is all the more important. The virtual team workers cannot physically walk into your office to ask clarifying questions, review goal statements posted on the walls or physically attend team focus meetings. Setting clear goals, expectations, and how each virtual member's contributions align to the goals is crucial. In order to allow inclusion of virtual team members, consider adding the project team goal statements on the front page of team work sites or find other ways of making them readily available.

2. Manage Communications: If you have read any of our previous articles, or indeed other project management material, you may recall that project management time is arguably 90% communication. There is no difference for this between collocated or virtual teams. The key difference for virtual team working is that project managers need to understand the specific communication needs of the virtual team workers, as well as their own communication style. Apart from perhaps an initial face-to-face meeting (which we recommend, if it is feasible), virtual team workers are connected to each other through electronic forms of communication (email, instant messaging, conference calls, videoconferences).

The constraint of being bound together by a "virtual" communication medium places a risk on project performance that needs to be managed. In order to mitigate this risk, the project manager needs to understand the importance of selecting the appropriate communication medium for each message. Be highly perceptive of cultural differences if your team is multi-national, and how different cultures may prefer different communication mediums.

Is something during your project significant enough to warrant a video conference (e.g. the achievement of a Milestone)? Only through video conferencing can you detect positive or negative body language. On phone calls (which are a common form of virtual communication), pay attention to the tone of voice being used; be perceptive to any signs of discontent or frustration. You can also hear if anyone is “tapping on a keyboard” during a conference call. Check that people are paying attention by making any conference call interactive.

3. Keep People Motivated: Any feelings of isolation and disconnection from the team have a direct correlation to the motivation of the virtual team member. It is also possible that “out of sight” means less focus on the virtual project, and more on activities with people who are physically next to you. The project manager should look for ways to keep the virtual team workers engaged and motivated throughout the project. Regular phone calls, perhaps combined with web meetings, are a useful way to achieve this.

Many of the same steps you take to motivate a collocated team can be used, but you need to adjust your style for the “virtual space”. A few tips are to add pictures of the team in the teamwork site, use video conferences whenever possible (remembering that they are more expensive than phone calls, so you may need to budget for this), hold a “virtual team lunch” to discuss lessons and updates, and make an allowance if you can for face-to-face time to celebrate successes and/or other major project milestones.

4. Regularly Assess the Effectiveness of the Remote Communications: The virtual working arrangement does not suit everyone. People work differently, they have different work styles, and they have varying degrees of comfort with using electronic communications technology. In order to effectively manage the communications of a virtual team, the project manager needs to accurately assess each person’s level of comfort or willingness to be in a virtual setting, and look for any behavior that may signal that a virtual team worker is suffering from “disconnection”. If so, assess the problem, have a conversation with the team member, and be prepared to implement appropriate actions to overcome the issue.

5. Use Virtual Collaboration Tools: This subject is broad enough to be an article by itself. A virtual team worker needs to have the means to work effectively in a virtual project. Phones with conferencing ability, online web meeting spaces, a global time clock (if the team is global), and mobile computers are some of the requirements. Modern online communication systems allow you to see if someone is “online” or not, or in a meeting (which can guide you as to whether to chat using an instant messaging tool). In the same manner as you ensure your team members software is compatible (particularly if they work for different organizations), the project manager needs to ensure the team members are trained in and have a comfort using such technologies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, virtual teams are increasingly prevalent in today’s world, and a lot of high quality information exists on how to work effectively as a team. As well as the economies that can be achieved from virtual teams, this style of project offers great potential for harnessing talent from many locations. Managing a virtual project team can be richly rewarding, and requires many of the same core competencies as managing a collocated team, with the added element of being highly sensitive to communication styles and ensuring appropriate styles are used depending on the occasion.

The elements we discuss above are all part of effective communication needed to mitigate the project risks associated with not being collocated. . The project manager should assess their own ability to be a virtual team worker, as well as being able to assess their team members. When project communication is working well, high-performing project teamwork can be achieved.

About Our Authors

Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, and Jeff Hodgkinson are experienced PMO, program, and project managers who through networking developed a mutual friendship. Realizing a common goal to help others, in February 2010, agreed to collaborate on a five (5) year program goal to write 100 PM subject articles (pro bono) for publication in any/all PM subject websites, newsletters, and professional magazines / journals.

Their mission is to help proliferate program and project management practices, add value and promote the PM profession, to be a positive influence to the PM Community, and in earnest hope readers gain benefit from the advice of their 60+ years of combined experience and expertise. To date, they have completed 14 articles and have a planned output of 1-2 articles per month. Although each of them are well credentialed, together they have the distinction of being 3 of only 25 worldwide that hold the Project Management Institute's PMP®, PgMP®, and PMI-RMP®. Credentials and continue to obtain others.

Along with writing articles, each also champions a role in the overall writing program collaboration process:

- Gareth manages all requests for additional guest author collaborations
- Gary manages the article development tracking and readership metrics
- Jeff manages the article distribution and new readership demographics



[Gareth Byatt](#) is Head of the IT Global Program Management Office for Lend Lease Corporation. Gareth has worked in several countries, and is currently located in Sydney, Australia. Gareth has 14+ years of project and program management experience in IT and construction. Gareth can be contacted through [LinkedIn](#).

Gareth holds numerous degrees, certifications and credentials in program and project management as follows: an MBA and first-class undergraduate management degree, PMP®, PgMP®, and PRINCE2. Gareth is also the APAC Region Director for the PMI's PMOSIG and chairs several peer networking groups.



[Gary Hamilton](#) is the Manager of the PMO and Governance within Bank of America's Learning and Leadership Development Products organization. Gary has 14+ years of project and program management experience in the IT, Finance and HR. He has won several internal awards for results achieved from projects and programs he managed as well as being named one of the Business Journal's Top 40 Professionals in 2007. Contact Gary through [LinkedIn](#).

Gary holds numerous degrees and certifications in IT, management, and project management and they include: an advanced MBA degree in finance, and has the PgMP®, PMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMI-SP®, ITIL-F, and SSGB professional certifications. Gary also is a 2009 Presidents' Volunteer Award recipient for his charitable work with local fire services and professional groups.



[Jeff Hodgkinson](#) is the IT Cloud Program Manager for Intel Corporation. He is a 30+ year veteran of Intel Corporation with a progressive career as a Program/Project Manager. He lives in Chandler, Arizona and volunteers in various support positions for the Phoenix PMI Chapter.

Jeff received the 2010 PMI (Project Mgmt Institute) Distinguished Contribution Award for his support of the Project Management profession from the Project Management Institute. Jeff was also the 2nd place finalist for the 2009 Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award™. Due to helping people achieve their goals, 'Hodge' as referred to by his many friends is one of the most well networked and recommended people on [LinkedIn](#).



Jeff holds numerous certifications and credentials in program and project management as follows: CCS, CDT, CPC™, CIPM™, CPPM-L10, CDRP, CSQE, IPMA Level-B®, ITIL-F, MPM™, PME™, PMOC, PMP®, PgMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMW, and SSGB.

He is an expert at program and project management principles and best practices and enjoys sharing his experiences with audiences around the globe as a keynote speaker.

Listed trademarks are the property of their registered owners