

# A REAL NOWHERE MAN:

## Managing Remote Teams Remotely

By JOE SOKOHL



**N**ot only do we work with people across the hall, across town, and across the country, but we also work with people we never meet from countries we know about only through Wikipedia or the Travel Channel.

Despite current financial upheavals, global work continues. The globalization genie is firmly out of the bottle.

Technology has provided us the ability to work in many ways, telecommute to save fuel and frustration, reduce travel costs, and use various forms of communication. The promise is there, yet the reality sometimes eludes us.

I've worked in situations where I reported to managers who were located miles away. Many times I felt as though they'd forgotten about me, and I was forced to beg for contact through email and invitations to conference calls, remind them that, "Hey! I'm still here! Over here! On the phone!" I've even been on conference calls where the folks in the conference room began writing on their whiteboard, saying, "Joe, imagine there's a pyramid ... with layers...." It was not the most connected way to work.

For the past 18 months, I have been managing remote user experience

teams. First, as the director of global UX for Keane Inc. from July 2007 through August 2008, I managed teams in India, Nova Scotia, and three locations in the United States—sometimes these teams included people I'd never met in person. In my current position with PracticeWorks LLC, I continue to perform multi-shore collaboration; from my home office in Virginia, I collaborate with teams in the United States (Maryland, Georgia, and Delaware), Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Asia.

### Principles to Live By

Being remote doesn't mean you have to be disconnected, yet it takes extra work to achieve a modicum of true connection, rather than perfunctory compliance. Understanding cultural ways of working has a profound effect on your ability to manage global teams.

#### Communication

Yes, I know it's a cliché, but communication is critical to global collaboration.

Communication with remote team members is even more critical than communication with your team in the office. If you are in an office with multiple people, but only a few of your team members are remote, you run the risk

of unintentionally ignoring them. And if, like me, you manage the team remotely, then you need to be explicit and frequent with your communication.

I like to have a one-on-one conversation each week with each team member. I also try to have a weekly roundtable discussion as a team. On projects, having short, daily meetings can provide critical touch points and feedback you might not think of if you're in the same office.

Yet communication is more than simply hosting meetings or sending out emails. It's also about your overall approach and your commitment to keeping your team engaged and informed.

#### Flexibility

As a manager, your dispersed, diverse team counts on you. You need to engender trust. So consider adjusting your schedule.

Too often, local teams hold meetings convenient to them, disregarding remote team members. I've seen US managers hold meetings at 2:00 PM Eastern Standard Time, forcing fellow Indian employees to come to work at 12:30 AM India Standard Time.

When I managed a team of 25 people in three locations in India, I never met



them. However, I knew that they were looking to me for guidance. With a ten-and-a-half-hour time difference separating us, I knew that holding meetings in the afternoon in Eastern Standard Time would make it extremely difficult for them to participate. I knew they would; their work ethic was nonpareil. Yet by adjusting my schedule a little, getting up earlier or staying awake a bit later, I garnered respect because I showed them respect.

A meeting at 11:00 PM my time was a welcoming 9:30 AM in Chennai, Bangalore, or Noida. So what if I stayed up until midnight? By changing my schedule, I allowed my team to have as normal a life as possible.

#### *Sensitivity*

All managers need to be sensitive to the needs and the variegated lives of their team members. As a manager of remote technical communicators, user experience analysts, and other creative people, you must commit yourself to understanding their needs. Because you rarely (if ever) meet with remote team members in person, you need to get to

know them and their culture.

If you live in Chicago but your team member works out of her house in the French Quarter of New Orleans, don't set up meetings on the Monday before Mardi Gras. Even if she wants to attend the meeting, she won't be able to hear you. Or if you have team members in China, know their holidays, such as the Spring Festival, so that you can respect their ability to participate in them.

#### *Courage*

Above all, you should show courageous behavior and attitude. Be fearless in watching out for your remote team members. We know the adage, "Out of sight, out of mind." As a person who manages out-of-sight employees, you need to be their watchdog, their filter, and their advocate. To be these things, you need the courage to stand up for your employees when other teams and management forget about them or marginalize them.

In addition, by being courageous, you engender yourself to the team as well as binding remote employees to each other.

#### **Tools**

We now have a wide assortment of tools that can enhance your ability to manage work. Software packages, Bluetooth headsets, email- and video-enabled phones all have their place. But I like to think of tools that provide lowest-common-denominator assistance to creating a sense of presence and team.

#### *Email*

I know this may seem obvious, but email is probably the easiest tool to implement. We all use it, and we use it prolifically.

When working globally, however, edit your email writing style to match your recipient's expectations. Avoid terseness and humor in email, especially irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and other easily misunderstood rhetorical constructs. Email is notoriously easy to misinterpret.

However, email serves well as a record of conversations and can be used to clarify your intended meaning to your team members. When working with teams who speak different languages, communicating in print in a common language helps immensely.



### Telephone

Although email certainly remains a key component of a global manager's collaboration toolkit, the telephone provides the best approach. Connecting with a voice-to-voice presence solves many human contact issues.

In addition, using conference calls allows you to keep everyone connected on specific topics in tandem—we all hear the same thing at the same time. The proliferation of inexpensive conference calling software such as Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) allows you to create a conference call with 24 other people for very little money.

However, telephone communication has some pitfalls.

- **Language:** For many people, listening to a second language proves more difficult than reading it. And speaking in that language proves even more difficult, for reasons ranging from fear of making mistakes to being misunderstood. If you make global calls, ensure that you enunciate, slow down your speech cadence, and avoid contractions, neologisms, colloquialisms, and geo-specific examples.

- **Clarity:** When talking on the phone, being heard is critical. Because others can't see you, they must rely on your voice alone. I know this sounds laboriously obvious, yet I continue to experience conference calls where the person speaking sits too far from the phone, or the people in the room talk to each other instead of directing their conversation to the person on the phone. When directing a conference call, don't mumble, don't write on the whiteboard, and make sure you speak into the microphone.
- **Written follow-up:** As soon as possible (but no more than 24 hours) after any major call, send a quick email summarizing any action items or key points.

If you use the telephone to communicate with your staff, make sure you adjust your habits according to your audience.

### Videoconferencing & Webcasting

Videoconferencing and webcasting can provide even richer collaborative experiences than conference calling. The video experience helps create empathy, and webcasting enables rich collaboration of onscreen movement, images, and examples.

While videoconferencing can employ expensive hardware and software, for most uses, a webcam and free software work fine. For example, whenever I need to communicate with one or two other people, I use the embedded iSight camera on my MacBook Pro along with Adobe Acrobat Connect. Other tools that provide help include YuuGuu and DimDim.

Putting video, webcasting, and telephone together, I also enhance design meetings by having a whiteboard in my office behind my chair. My recipients can see me, but the camera can also view my whiteboard as I draw. While I

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could use onscreen whiteboard tools (and sometimes do), I find that the act of writing on the whiteboard in my office adds to the sense of being there, of being connected with my team.

*Web-based Collaboration Tools*

Many companies offer intranets in an attempt to enhance collaboration. Despite the major investment companies make into intranets, these platforms rarely succeed in providing core communication tools.

In fact, most people gravitate away from them. Why? Simple ... they're not simple. Regardless of their good intentions, these tools have become bloated beyond their usefulness, especially in large organizations.

On the other hand, incorporating lighter-weight, focused tools, such as 37signals' Basecamp for project information and Alfresco's enterprise content management solutions, helps simplify many web-based problems. For

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technical communicators especially, having lightweight collaboration tools can really help, even if your IT department looks a bit askance.

*Microblogging*

With the explosive adoption of Twitter, microblogging has passed the tipping point of fad into useful tool. Comcast Interactive Media uses direct messaging on Twitter to communicate with team members. And my team is experimenting with Yammer, an in-network corporate Twitter, as it were.

Also, for many people in second- or third-world countries, texting is cheaper than phoning, so using a group tool

such as Twitter can enhance your connection to your team.

**Final Thoughts**

Tools, techniques, and principles help you connect with team members, no matter where you or they are located. Yet above all, your best tool is empathy. Being empathetic with your team enables you to reach across borders and boundaries to connect, inspire, and lead. **i**

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