Project Management in Distributed Teams

Geographically distributed teams are a fact of working life today. People working in different time zones, and in different cultural milieus, are expected to collaborate and work together on a single project.

Why Distributed Teams Exist

Distributed teams exist for a number of reasons. Global corporations with offices all over the world are not new, but the interdependence and the need for collaboration and tightly integrated methods of working has increased, with teams in different countries working towards one initiative. In the software industry, due to the differential in cost of software development, many companies have either outsourced their software development to vendors in another country, or have their own branch there.

There is no doubt that a collocated team is more efficient and much easier to manage than a distributed team. But the benefits of distributed teams, or virtual teams cannot be overlooked. Experts on a particular subject do not need to be moved to be part of a team. The cost factor, mentioned above, is a major reason for distributed teams in the software industry.

Good project Management Practices

Let us look at some team management practices that are required for good project management of a collocated team.

- A Clear Mission
- Explicit definition of tasks and responsibilities
- Adequate interaction modes and communication
- Creation of a conflict resolution process
- Structured methods of communication and collaboration

These same practices are also what is required for good management of a distributed team, but the emphasis needs to be on communication. Communication is a very important factor in the smooth running of any project, and this becomes more evident than ever in a distributed team.

Communication in a Distributed Team Environment

What are the methods and flavors of communication that can, and should be used in managing a project, and with what special considerations in a distributed team environment.

1. Structured, periodic or event-driven communication
2. Knowledge management and inventory sharing
3. Brainstorming and strategy calibration
4. Impromptu collaboration

1. Structured, periodic or event-driven communication

The most basic requirement for a project team would be a way for structured communication of things like bugs, change requests, task assignment etc. These are important for any team, but in the case of distributed teams, the importance of documenting them precisely and in detail is very high.

2. Knowledge management and inventory sharing

There should be a system by which users can maintain and view shared documents and discussion threads. Project statuses, and tasks can be maintained online so that they are accessible to all team members, keeping everyone on the same page.

One of the important facets of knowledge management is collaboration. Besides process streamlining by keeping everyone informed, one of the biggest benefits of collaboration is innovation. Innovation is a natural byproduct of people working together and exchanging ideas, and this level of interaction is very easy to lose in a distributed setup.

Collaboration can be encouraged and implemented in a number of ways using various tools. Chat is a very effective way of communication. All project members could be required to be on a chat group. Scheduled presentations, and web conferences, using other collaborative tools like white boards.

3. Brainstorming and strategy calibration

This is an exercise that is as important for, and needs to be conducted for collocated teams too. In the case of distributed teams it needs to be given a lot of bandwidth. Alignment of strategy and mission in a distributed team, requires intensive real-time interaction between various team members. Meetings with a very comprehensive conferencing facility are helpful. Web conferencing tools with

white boards, chat, web presentations, application may be used to a reasonable degree of success.

4. Impromptu Collaboration
A lot of good ideas come from unscheduled meetings and casual talk at the lunch table. That is something that is missing if co-workers are not in the same office. But something like a chat program, which team members have to keep on at all times, and maintain proper status on, can go a long way to filling the gap.

Guidelines to Communication in a Virtual Team
Communicating with people you may have met rarely, or never, and who may belong to a different culture, will need to be handled a little more carefully, and differently from communicating with co-workers sitting across the hall. There are some rules of thumb to keep in mind when communicating with virtual team members.

Clear Communications:
Make sure that your communication is very clear and question and try to get some feedback to confirm that it has been understood.

Protocol and Hierarchy in Communication:
The distances can easily blunt the urgency and importance of a message. A hierarchy of communication methods might help. So a phone call may show the importance of a particular communication. Or usage of email systems flagging the level of urgency/importance of a message may be laid down as a rule in the project.

Availability of a team member could be an important metric of performance. Everyone should know when a person is going to be available, and how to reach the person.

Extra Time Padding:
Always expect things to take much longer in a distributed team, since couriers, transfers and communication over the internet, and phone calls may not work as expected and can delay things.

Call Often:
Talk often to close communication gaps. This prevents misunderstandings and closes problems early on.

About Nagarro:

Nagarro Inc. has extensive knowledge in designing and implementing solutions on underlying portal technologies. These solutions comprise documents management systems, workflow and notification systems, project tracking tools, event calendars, collaboration systems and estimation systems. Nagarro has worked on Plumtree Portal, iPlanet and BEA Portal.

Nagarro has wide ranging experience in web-enabling business critical applications for increased productivity and efficiency from the value chain in a virtual enterprise. Nagarro has effectively met the business needs of its Fortune 500 clients.

Nagarro attracts and retains brilliant engineers from the world's premium engineering and business schools. We have comprehensive expertise in the domains of manufacturing, finance, healthcare and telecom.

At Nagarro, quality software is not just bug-free code, but a solution that serves the customer needs. A clearly defined quality policy, a dedicated QA team, a commitment towards CMM practices and an independently verifiable SQA process make our software quality one of the best in the industry.

Projistics is a web-based product suite from Nagarro for managing entire project lifecycle and logistics seamlessly, by facilitating collaboration in distributed teams.