Communication Strategies for Successful Virtual Teams

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Abstract

This study takes a closer look at communication as a team building strategy for global firms with an employee base with both geographical and cultural diversity. It provides some insight into the communication challenges that managers of a global workforce face, how existing technologies may or may not alleviate these challenges, and recommendations for managing the workforce effectively. The emerging communication technologies and tools are discussed, including their benefits in addressing the challenges of managing a remote workforce. We propose that these new tools form a new paradigm addressing the communication gaps often encountered in managing a global workforce, by facilitating more engagement and proactive participation by employees, resulting in more employees that have a more rewarding experience and a more productive team output. Finally the role of the manager in maintaining effective communication and building trust to maximize the potential of a culturally and geographically diverse workforce is analyzed.

1. Introduction

Communication lies at the heart of all human interactions and relationships. In business if teams are the leverage to a company’s high performance and competitive advantage [13], then communication is the fulcrum on which the leverage amplifies it’s potential. The root of the word communicate speaks to its limitless potential to maximize results. The Latin origin of communicate translates to connect, to impart and to participate [14]. In other words communicate really signifies the transfer of thought, ideas and feelings. Team function would not exist without communication. How then do team members, in a global company, communicate when the challenge is not just to impart meaning and understanding across the table but across national borders and divergent cultures?

Lessons in communication tactics and strategies can be seen in countless global companies. The trend over the past decade toward more open markets around the world has seen the rise of multinational companies from the United States and Europe to developing countries on every continent. Ericsson is one such global company that aims to create high functioning teams throughout its vast global market. It has the unique vantage point of not just globally communicating with customers and employees the world over but also of being a driver in the telecommunications industry. A significant portion of the world’s mobile communication is conducted on Ericsson’s sophisticated networks [5]. As a leader in promoting what Ericsson terms a networked society, it warrants investigation to see if and how they have accomplished this objective within their own structure. Successes they have garnered can then be applied to other companies, global and local alike. Henry Ford pointed out nearly one hundred years ago that “If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself” [6]. Given the importance of communication in exponentially strengthening performance, let us closely examine the components of communication, the implication of those components in a global setting and then specifically how technology can facilitate and enhance communication. Perhaps the insights gained can be applied to connections of all levels, elevating our human experience in an ever evolving high tech world.

We believe that those with experience managing in firms that have a global footprint understand what it takes to manage a global workforce. It is also clear that broadband Internet has improved and become more ubiquitous globally, driving down the cost of communicating in real time with text, voice, video, and collaborative whiteboard/application sharing. What has been lacking in the research is putting these two pieces together -- the challenges of managing, and what aspects of technology can address those challenges in providing tools that address the inhibitors of a globally dispersed workforce. This paper provides a literature review of managing a global workforce, reviews technology tools available, and addresses what challenges of managing a global workforce in the literature might be addressed with such tools. It extends the current research on the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of basic digital communication tools in use at firms with geographically dispersed workforces.
such as email, instant messaging, and traditional room based video conferencing to assess the potential of additional tools such as lower cost Internet Protocol (IP) based video, application sharing, document management systems, and corporate social media tools. Finally, realizing that such communication tools do not minimize the impact of the "human" element, particularly the challenges of the manager in developing and deploying a global workforce and managing it effectively, aspects of effective communication, maintaining trust, and managing conflict in a global team will be discussed.

2. Managing Geographically Dispersed Teams

Any manager knows of the challenges they face in making a team of individuals located together productive. The challenge is compounded when the team is distributed globally. Managing a team that has an offshore component has aspects that include managing people, cultural diversity, geographic diversity, and communication [7]. The key points of these four aspects are as follows:

- People management refers to the fact that coordination challenges and miscommunication are bound to happen when the team is geographically distributed.
- Cultural diversity will be a challenge given the various backgrounds, languages, and beliefs of the employee base that can create "culture shock" for some team members.
- Geographic diversity refers to the "out of sight, out of mind" mentality a workforce that is not continually plugged in from a communication perspective can have given they are not physically together, along with the time differences in different regions across the world that must be dealt with.
- Communication refers to what modes of communication will work best depending on not only the cultural and geographic diversity, but also the type of work the firm is engaged in and what communication modes work best for that business, and its workforce.

Other literature cites the "touch points" a company has with its employee base during the employment life cycle -- enforcing the need to implement employee engagement programs during onboarding, learning, and performance [22]. Employees should be engaged the minute they are interviewing for a position, for the opportunity cost of hiring an individual that becomes dissatisfied, only to have to recruit and hire a replacement, is high. Onboarding processes should thus be handled consistently and be "made aware of the correlation between onboarding, engagement, and productivity." Even with cultural diversity during the hiring process, the onboarding process should remain consistent as the global workforce is hired and maintained. Since employees often struggle with their role in a large global company, i.e., what their job is doing to "move the needle" for the firm; it is also important to make sure the vision and mission of the business is clearly articulated to the workforce. Those messages, along with key training materials, are much simpler to make available online with the internet today, but it still cannot replace face to face interactions when possible. The performance review process should similarly be kept consistent. If an employee is clearly aware of the company’s mission and objectives, his/her role in achieving these objectives, with clear communication to direct management and communication tools to enable learning/get the job done, the performance appraisal process will be more consistent. Consistent appraisals should be welcomed by employees with no surprises as to what work they were expected to do, and what their accomplishments were toward helping the company meet its goals.

Mounir Hilal, VP of Strategic Accounts at Tenrox, describes seven strategies for effectively managing a global workforce [8]:

1. Communicating efficiently and effectively. Put together a communication plan, and include all personnel working the project and how they can be contacted.
2. Managing time zones wisely. Time zones must be considered when scheduling virtual meetings that require participants from all over the world.
3. Conduct weekly internal team meetings. Per the previous discussion of communicating effectively, and being consistent, this helps the team members feel totally plugged in to what is going on, with clear direction on what they must to in the coming week.
4. Peer reviews. These are much more critical when team members cannot meet face to face. Team members should be ready to openly critique work, address gaps, and make contributions to key deliverables.
5. Use automation. A good web-based tool is necessary that allows the team to collaborate digitally.
6. Exchange personnel regularly to build interpersonal relationships. For team members that work remotely, bringing them to the home office or another key work location occasionally helps them get to know their team members better face to face, making them more committed and willing to help when they are remote again.
7. Yearly summit to bring everyone together.
An annual gathering provides an opportunity for team members that work together all year long, but never meet face to face, to get that opportunity.

Finally, there is a lesson to be learned from NASA. In 2004 NASA hired a Canadian subcontractor to build the sensor system that inspects space shuttles during orbit. The firm was based in Toronto, Canada and communication with NASA in Houston, Texas was virtual. When the project schedule started to get threatened, NASA realized that while it had the best virtual communications tools in the industry, the reliance on digital communication makes it easy to lose touch with people on the other end of those e-mails [23]. NASA referred to this disconnect as "virtual distance," or the problem that happens when team members "work together and communicate primarily through electronic media." Its three major components are physical distance (space, time, and environment), operational distance (psychological gaps that occur from everyday problems being worked) and affinity distance (emotional disconnects of teams that have no relationship with one another). Clearly as firms with a global workforce look to electronic mechanisms to keep their employees communicating effectively and engaged in their work, a plan must be in place to make sure this is not the only way that employees bond and form meaningful enough relationships. They need to have a vested interest in other team members’ success.

3. Digital Communications Technology

The availability of a broad set of communication tools based on Internet Protocol, and the growing, ubiquitous availability of Internet worldwide, has made the use of cheaper, more efficient communication methods possible. This section summarizes the various communication techniques firms use today to aid in the communication between geographically distributed employees.

Electronic Mail: This is still one of the most common communication techniques for any major firm, whether its workforce is centrally located or distributed worldwide.

Instant Messaging: Corporations can purchase instant messaging clients separately, but often they are integrated directly into the e-mail system. Microsoft Lync is one such example that shows contact info for all employees, and lets team members send instant messages as well as files if desired.

Voice Calls: The days of international calls costing a fortune are over now that these can ride over the Internet. Global firms can purchase and deploy Voice over IP (VoIP) from companies like Cisco, and calling from the U.S. to India can appear as if the employee is merely dialing an internal extension to reach a team member halfway around the world. In fact, even with cellular phones many people do not realize that instead of calling internationally at high per minute rates, they can download communication software like Skype or Viber to do so. Additionally, as illustrated in figure 1, Facetime on Apple iPhones uses IP so employees can communicate to team members globally with video and voice, using IP at no additional cost beyond their data plan for their cell phone.

![Facetime app on an Apple iPhone](http://example.com/facetime.jpg)

**Figure 1. Facetime app on an Apple iPhone**

Video Conferencing: As early as a decade ago, having a robust video conferencing system required special rooms, leasing of dedicated expensive circuits for point to point communication links between key company sites. Today, video conferencing can occur over standard Internet Protocol (IP) making it easy for global firms with high speed Internet to employees' desktops, to permit team members to communicate globally. As illustrated in figure 2, multi-party video conferencing systems can also be supported over IP.

Application Sharing: Users are able to share an application, literally being able to let different team members to take over the controls of the application. This permits collaborative sessions where a document can be worked and reviewed by many individuals remotely. Another variant of this is remote demos of software that can be broadcast to all members of the online session. This can also be used for corporate training and other learning sessions for employees -- for example the director of a major international project could project their Microsoft Project Gantt charts and then move to a PowerPoint presentation to review objectives and goals for the coming week.
Document Management Systems: As illustrated in figure 3, applications such as Microsoft’s SharePoint let users access a common repository of files and content, being able to edit files that are located in the Internet cloud (typically in a Virtual Private Network of the firm) making it easy to maintain a central repository of all key concepts and files related to a project consisting of a geographically dispersed, global workforce. Variants of such management systems can also be used as knowledge management systems, a repository of information that evolves over time and reflects the knowledge base a company has gained in working on a project, taking customer support calls, and so forth. Such systems help make virtually all key data needed by any employee available to them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Social Networking Tools. Most people would equate Facebook with social networking, but many private portals for corporations have been formed. There are several third party tools available for corporations to have their own private site to facilitate social networking of employees. Ideas, project issues, any concept can be posted and used for discussions and ideation by a global workforce. One example in use across companies is LinkedIn, but there are also specialized social network tools for use inside a corporation, such as Yammer (see figure 4) that are available to let corporations run their own private social network for collaboration. There are many additional technology solutions to communication amongst a team of geographically dispersed employees, but the methods above are often combined in various fashions to deliver a solution that is deemed most appropriate for the communication needs at hand. Thus, the technologies above will be used in discussing how these digital communication methods fare with respect to communication challenges in a global company.

4. Technology and Its Ability to Address Communication Challenges

[12] assessed whether collaboration tools boost workplace communication and/or collaboration. Table 1 summarizes the pros and cons of various collaboration tools from his research. Electronic mail, instant messaging, and video conferencing are the basic tenets of communication that most firms think of when it comes to making sure their global workforce separated by culture and geography can communicate most effectively. However, technology continues to advance and new communication mediums are becoming more common in global companies. Electronic mail, instant messaging, and video conferencing are the basic tenets of communication that most firms think of when it comes to making sure their global workforce separated by culture and geography can communicate most effectively. However, technology continues to advance and new communication mediums are becoming more common in global companies. This paper thus far has summarized challenges managers have in managing a global, remote workforce effectively and summarized some of the communication options technology provides. The newer options in the last table provide some potentially compelling ways to engage a geographically and culturally diverse employee base:

- New conferencing tools on PCs and cell phones make it easier for employees to communicate with team members more spontaneously, rather than formal scheduled meetings the old “video conference room” way, facilitating more engagement from the employee base for one to one communications, and small group efforts.
- Application sharing is a great technology to maintain consistency for the employee in their respective lifecycle while working at the company, as it is conducive to not only all employee meetings that communicate news and evolving objectives and challenges of the company (e.g. monthly presentations by the CEO) but also is an excellent platform for training and even collaboration on a project.
- Document management systems let remote employees have the complete compendium of documents available at their fingertips, transcending different time zones of a global workforce.
- Social network tools specialized for corporate use foster a "blog" type environment where
Table 1. Pros and cons of collaboration tools [12]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video Conferences using PC and Mobile Phone Based Technology</td>
<td>Ability to address spontaneous, &quot;impulsive&quot; meeting needs</td>
<td>Possible configuration challenges for remote employees with no on-site IT personnel. Spontaneity may result in more collaboration among smaller workgroups, even 1:1 where it might not have happened otherwise</td>
<td>Its availability of low cost conferencing options on desktop PCs, laptops, tablets, and cell phones increases the likelihood that more group/spontaneous collaboration one on one or in small groups will result from using this technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application Sharing</td>
<td>Rich, synchronous communication. Cost-effective way for training to keep global workforce abreast of company developments. Maintains consistency in the employee lifecycle -- easy tool to train, and engage. Interoperability -- many web browser based tools available. Helps overcome cultural (language) diversity since a &quot;picture is worth a thousand words&quot;</td>
<td>Like email, some potential for social loafers and free riders</td>
<td>Application sharing is an excellent tool not only for small group collaboration on key projects when dispersed geographically, but it is also an excellent medium for having company all employee presentations and other one to many training events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Management Systems</td>
<td>&quot;One stop shop&quot; for all employees globally to have access to all the same information</td>
<td>Low communication medium</td>
<td>Document management systems do not promote employee engagement and it is never guaranteed employees will notice key document updates quickly, but it is a 24x7 resource where employees should, if managed properly, be able to find any piece of data they need to do their job, especially when working apart from other team members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networking Tools</td>
<td>Affinity to the technology, given the millions of users that use such tools for personal communication. Promotes brainstorming and collaboration. Provides a basis for peer reviews of new ideas and concepts.</td>
<td>Medium communication content, somewhat synchronous. Possibility for some employees to get consumed with this communication method, damaging overall productivity in completing tasks.</td>
<td>Specialized social network tools like Yammer for corporations promotes brainstorming and peer reviews of new ideas, but there is always the chance that some employees will spend so much time on this, that they won't focus on their real project deliverables enough to help the team deliver.</td>
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employees can brainstorm, review project objectives and challenges, and provide an excellent medium for peer reviews.

5. Challenges for Global Team Building and Organizational Development

The rapid pace of change in the modern world has seen the evolution of team structure within corporations the world over. High functioning teams provide a competitive advantage in that they can synthesize perspectives and knowledge from several people and arrive at decisions that surpass traditional hierarchical decisions [13]. Teams within organizations capitalize on a concept of strength in numbers. The more people involved in analyzing a situation and brainstorming ideas to meet company objectives, the better the results. Multinational companies may have employees with expertise located throughout their global markets. In order for teams of these multinational companies to be successful it is imperative to get the subject matter experts involved in the conversation regardless of the location. This forms the rationale for a virtual team.

6. Global Virtual Team Development
A virtual team is one in which some or all members are separated by space which might be in terms of distance, time or organizational boundaries [20]. In other words, it could literally be across the hall or across the globe. For purposes of this discussion, we will explore the unique opportunities and challenges of virtual teams whose members converge from great distances, many times across nations, time zones and cultures. Structures to support and foster positive team collaboration have been pursued and studied for decades. While virtual teams share the same basic structural elements of on-location teams, they are much more complex. The fundamental elements of successful teams are a common clear purpose, organization structure that includes subject matter experts, team rules, strong leadership support, and open communication and collaboration [24]. While all elements are important and contribute to success, communication and collaboration drawn from trust are considered the foundation of team function [13]. From a basis of trust, conflict or diversity can be handled without derailing the team’s efforts. The pyramid in Figure 7 illustrates how effective teams start with trust and then learn to skillfully address conflict. The barriers to and tactics of trust building and conflict management are the primary areas virtual teams vary from on-location teams. Both must be carefully and strategically planned and nurtured.

![Figure 3. The five functions of a team [13]](image)

Businesses need to create and maintain trust within teams and work groups especially in global virtual environments. Trust is actually a byproduct of knowledge about another person, either personal knowledge of values and principles or experiential knowledge of skill sets and work performance [4]. One on one interaction and time play the biggest role with open and ongoing communication serving as the vehicle on which trust is built. Unfortunately with virtual teams all these dynamics are either altered or absent. Technology can help mimic one on one interaction but does little to enhance understanding and appreciation for cultural value differences.

Culture can be a very real barrier to virtual team performance. It is defined in terms of one or all of three unique categories as applied to each individual team member. The categories are national, organizational, and functional culture [4]. National culture does not necessarily follow established country borders but refers instead to the ethnicity or subculture a person derives shared meaning from [9]. The four dimensions of culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity / femininity, and individual versus collectivism, were outlined by Hofstede in 1967 and can still be helpful in differentiating one national purpose, organization structure that includes subject matter experts, team rules, strong leadership support, and open communication and collaboration [24]. While all elements are important and contribute to success, communication and collaboration drawn from trust are considered the foundation of team function [13]. From a basis of trust, conflict or diversity can be handled without derailing the team’s efforts. The pyramid in Figure 7 illustrates how effective teams start with trust and then learn to skillfully address conflict. The barriers to and tactics of trust building and conflict management are the primary areas virtual teams vary from on-location teams. Both must be carefully and strategically planned and nurtured.

Cross cultural-literacy and cultural sensitivity starts with self awareness of one’s own style, grows with the development of cultural competence through learning, and is further enhanced when members become culturally adaptable [25]. No factor of virtual team interaction is beyond the influence of cultural impact. Even the hour and day selected for meetings can seem culturally insensitive if convenient times always cater to members based at corporate headquarters, requiring geographically dispersed members to work off hours, weekends, or local holidays in order to participate [3]. While no one time will be ideal for all, even this structural component of teams could potentially undermine the fostering of trust and thus needs careful planning. Hidden attributes of culture can and often do play a significant role in
perceptions of team members and leaders of teams. Observed behaviors are just the surface dimensions as illustrated in Figure 8 [4]. What lies beneath also affects perceptions of team members’ and leaders’ perceptions of one another. Using tactics to uncover and establish trust around the hidden elements will prevent obstacles beneath the surface from impeding progress or sinking team potential. These must also be factored into tactics to establish trust in order to build collaboration.

Any trust issues must be addressed to drive virtual team performance in order to progress teams to the second level on the pyramid of Five Functions of a Team, conflict management [13]. Even without the added challenges of virtual teams when remoteness is a factor, a manager must still find methods to build trust, respect, communication, collaboration and continual learning (Scholtes, Joiner & Streibel, 2003). Often perceived as a negative, healthy debate and diversity of ideas is a key ingredient to the synergy desired from team effort. Synergy is gaining a result greater than the sum of the parts and will not occur without a safe environment where members are free to share divergent viewpoints [15].

Figure 4. The hidden dimensions of the culture iceberg [4]

It is useful to think of conflict not as a static undesirable symptom of interaction but rather on a continuum that ranges from artificial harmony to constructive disagreement through to the other side, which is destructive quarreling onto poisonous personal attack [13]. The ideal for high performing teams of all types is a balance in the middle of the spectrum, healthy, respectful, trust based discord.

7. Conflict Resolution

There are numerous characteristics that can present potential pitfalls to managing productive conflict on virtual teams many of which are successfully avoided once trust has been established. But even with considerable effort to initially build trust, virtual teams are likely to be comprised of individuals from dissimilar work groups, backgrounds, and positions not to mention language and communication preference differences. Maintaining a balance of the positive attributes of conflict requires strong leadership and facilitation skills. Steve Jobs places the burden of team function on leadership. When leaders encourage and role model open collaboration and sharing of alternative points of view, then team members will follow suit [11].

Leaders are also responsible to watch for signs of unresolved conflict. Classic signs of unaddressed conflict are relatively subtle with virtual teams. Classic conflict clues include group think, hidden agendas, disengagement and passive aggressive behaviors, all of which become easily masked when using virtual communication methods. Tools to continually monitor member satisfaction with progress and level of contribution should be utilized by leadership and shared back with members for ongoing feedback [4]. The aim is to foster an environment of trust with productive discord is no less important for teams meeting from across the globe then across the conference table. In fact, the stakes with virtual teams are often higher and mistrust and disharmony allowed to fester will be all the more difficult to overcome. Job titles and level within the organization should not affect equal participation, nor should limitations of language, communication styles or access to technology [3]. Leaders of virtual teams will need to develop operational tactics to preemptively fend off potential problems. The knowledge, skill, and perspectives of diverse team members will strengthen the team’s outcome. Conflict resolution must be operationalized into virtual team building strategies and tactics.

Beyond the considerations of trust and conflict resolution, critical success factors and certain dimensions of team dynamics have been identified for virtual teams. In figure 5, the factors for virtual team success are so complex it is difficult to encapsulate a perfect representation of all components. Research into the topic quickly reveals far too many alternative ways to organize virtual team makeup for the scope of this paper. Figure 9 merges two separate approaches from just a single source in an attempt to summarize and provide a frame of reference for this discussion. Three overarching dynamics are found in all virtual teams, the effect of time, team composition and the team environment [4]. Challenges around time and the barriers these challenges interject in the pursuit of results simply cannot be overstated. Time zone challenges between members as previously stated, timelines imposed by the project scope and mission, and time orientations related to culture will all factor into planning, organizing and ultimately achieving or failing to achieve goals.
Of the critical success factors found under each of the three dynamics, well thought-out and advanced application of information and communication technology obviously weighs heavily on a virtual team’s collaboration [20]. Communication and the use of technology are indispensable to team functioning in any circumstance, exponentially more so with virtual teams. But technology alone cannot guarantee good outcomes. The importance of policies, training and processes under the dynamic of environment also reinforce team performance [4]. The team composition dynamic incorporates not only actual team members and leaders but also factors of competence and culture. While none of the success factors are necessarily easy to alter or indicative of performance in and of themselves, they all contribute and depending on the nature of the virtual team’s structure and purpose, may be more powerful than even the latest most connected information and communication technology.

Figure 5. Virtual Team Dynamics and Critical Success Factors [4]

CEO Bob Buckman aptly expressed the impact of the various success factors for virtual teams in his statement, “it’s ninety percent culture and ten percent technology.” [20]

Ericsson is one multinational large company who seems to understand the rationale behind this ratio of culture versus technology at a core level. As a communications giant responsible for forty percent of all world mobile networks in about 180 countries [5], it would be easy for Ericsson executives to overemphasize the potential for technology alone. Their mission clearly articulates their drive to be the innovator in creating an all-communicating world [5]. Within their internal company that spans the globe, they make full use of all electronic tools previously mentioned plus many others from video conferencing, email, virtual classrooms, an electronic executive corner for strategic information, and a knowledge management system ([1],[2]). [5] has set in motion their concept of a networked society where technology links human interactions on a very real-time, intimate basis and yet they have not ignored high touch for high tech. They have invested a considerable amount of time and capital from their thirty-five billion dollar business to develop employees at all levels and from every location on both leadership and diversity skills [2]. They are so intensely committed to this endeavor that they recently sent a large group of executives from around the world to a cultural experiential retreat in Africa [26]. The leaders spent an entire week assimilating to the local culture, sharing their personal lessons learned and even capped off their time with an overnight stay in primitive Tanzanian homes. Meaningful gains in cultural awareness, leadership skills and career purpose were noted by attendees [26]. Of course it goes without saying that Ericsson provides a strong case study for the use of global communication technology for all types of businesses. They use the resources they promote to the rest of the business community to impact their teams’ trust, conflict management and performance results but they put people first.

8. Recommendations for Successful Virtual Teams

To lead or manage a successful team takes work. To lead and/or manage a virtual team successfully, takes on a whole new level of leadership, coordination, and communication. There are more global virtual teams today than ever before. And their numbers are increasing rapidly [16].

One of the things that someone, as the leader, should consider is how they typically lead a group of people or employees in this case. What are their leadership style, strengths, and pitfalls? The same approach taken locally will not necessarily work with a virtual, geographically dispersed team. While co-located teams often benefit most from a leader who acts as a facilitator, virtual teams need a manager who provides clearly defined direction and removes all ambiguity from the process. Team leaders have to formalize roles and responsibilities—starting with their own [16]. It is essential that a virtual team in managed properly. If it is not managed correctly, a lack of trust can undermine everything that the virtual team is trying to achieve [17].

In addition to leading differently, a manager must come to his or her decisions in a different way as well as developing trust in a different manner than with that of local teams. In the U.S., managers are trained to solicit input from a team, choose a direction quickly and make adjustments as the project moves forward. It works, but then so do other methods. In Sweden teams
learn to make decisions through lengthy consensus building, which can span many meetings but eventually leads to strong buy-in and rapid implementation. In France the Descartes-inspired education system teaches that debate and confrontation are necessary elements of any decision-making process. In Japan decisions tend to be made in informal one-on-one discussions before a formal group meeting [16]. As a group leader it is imperative for that person to recognize their style of leadership. Upon doing so, the leader virtual team should be given clear directions as to how decisions will be made amongst other important things. When it comes to developing trust, this can be one of the biggest challenges for group leaders and fellow teammates, for that matter. In a geographically distributed team, trust is measured almost exclusively in terms of reliability [16].

Lastly, the most important thing for any virtual team and leader is communication. Communication is the key to successful teams of any nature. There are many options for face-to-face global communication, including free and open source programs, proprietary commercial software, and programs that offer both free and paid versions [21].

Our recommendations for any virtual team and team leader would be to utilize all forms of communication technologies. One of the biggest advantages with technology today is that there are plenty of ways to communicate. Ericsson and United Parcel Service (UPS), both global corporations, use a combination of videoconferences and teleconferences the majority of the time. In addition to those two options, both companies use email as a regular and more informal means to communication to stay in contact with one another. Email provides a means to deliver information which allows for people to respond when it is convenient and, more importantly, during their time zones. Instant messaging is also something UPS, for example, uses internally at times. It allows its employees to get quick answers to questions that are not as important or need to be discussed amongst the entire group of team members. Additionally, one way we recommend employees connect is through sources such as LinkedIn. LinkedIn is much like Facebook but more related to business relationships and networking. Having a LinkedIn page and connecting in this manner allows members to see each other’s’ profile pictures, work history, education, skills, and personal interests. Ultimately, a combination of all forms of technological communication will be advantageous to the group and much more cost effective than face-to-face meetings.

9. Conclusion

This paper discussed the challenges managers face in managing a workforce with geographic and cultural diversity. With limited ability to facilitate face to face collaboration, employees at such companies can easily become disengaged, dissatisfied, and not really see a connection in the work they are doing relative to moving the objectives of the company forward. Research dictates the need to keep employees engaged through their employment lifecycle, keeping the job “fresh” and a vehicle for not only professional development, but personal growth.

The typical communication tools relied on by such global firms, electronic mail, instant messaging, and video conferencing, often make it easier for geographically separated team members to disengage and become less productive. New tools that build on these communication foundational concepts, including PC/phone based IP communications for video/voice, application sharing, document management systems, and social networking tools for corporations hold promise to address some of the gaps seen in communication at global firms today, and should be considered if they are not already in use. Video conferencing made possible on PCs and cell phones make it easier for employees to communicate with team members more spontaneously, rather than formal scheduled meetings the old "video conference room" way, facilitating more engagement from the employee base for one to one communications, and small group efforts. Application sharing is conducive to not only all employee meetings that communicate news and evolving objectives and challenges of the company but also is an excellent platform for training and even collaboration on a project. Document management systems let remote employees have 24x7 access to all critical company documents overcoming different time zones of a global workforce. Finally, social networking tools provide a medium for employees to brainstorm, review project objectives and challenges, and provide an excellent medium for peer reviews which was identified as a crucial requirement in keeping a distributed team engaged.

However, leveraging such digital communication tools is not enough for a manager of a global workforce. Managers must understand how critical their role is in making sure the team communicates effectively; mitigate any issues brought up by cultural differences, time zone differences; and work constantly on maintaining a trust relationship in the entire team; to ensure that a high degree of communication amongst team members is maintained. Only then can teams operate efficiently and effectively, complete projects and achieve results.

10. References
