

Tools for Global Virtual Teams

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Choosing media for virtual teams can be a difficult task. With *global* virtual teams made up of participants from different countries and cultures, additional factors need to be considered. As with any team, the choice of tools should be discussed with the participants, a variety of tools should be used to address different needs and preferences, and guidelines or protocols should be established for the use of each tool. The chart below examines some typical tools used by virtual teams and illustrates some of the particular concerns that global teams may need to consider.

TOOL	BENEFITS	POSSIBLE PROBLEMS	TIPS
EMAIL	<p>Email is fast, direct, bi-directional, and people can open and reply to messages when they decide it is convenient for them to do so.</p> <p>Because you can send and receive at your convenience, this medium does not have to interrupt meetings or other work.</p> <p>Because email lets you read and respond at your own pace, this is a good tool for polychronic people to work with those who are more monochronic.</p>	<p>When email is not answered within a certain amount of time, problems may arise on the team. These can be caused by problems with work or by cultural differences in the notion of the time.</p>	<p>Groups using email should define standards of reply time and encourage the use of "out-of-office"/ or "am sick today" messages when recipients will not be able to check their messages on a frequent basis.</p>

It is a good tool for people from **individualistic** and **monochronic** cultures who like to be able to order and control the communication medium.

People from more collective cultures may find that email is a good for exchanging information AFTER trust has been built.

Email can be especially valuable for teams if language causes a problem.

When there are linguistic barriers, email provides time to use translation services, dictionaries, or other tools.

For some people from more **collective** cultures, this media could be too cold and impersonal.

These people may prefer personal face-to-face communication, video- or teleconferencing to email.

Differences in language proficiency could be embarrassing to some members of the group, and offers of help could cause delicate situations with certain hierarchical situations or cultures.

For people from more collective cultures, email should be used in conjunction with other types of tools.

For important messages and resolving conflicts, a more personal approach may be necessary (at least a telephone call, and if possible a face to face meeting).

Team members could offer editing services to those who are not working in their first language – but this must be handled carefully. Offers of this sort should be made discretely, and not in front of the entire group, to avoid embarrassing anyone of causing them to lose face.



Because email lacks power symbols, it may be difficult for people from cultures with high **power distance** to establish the correct way to treat power differences.

These details may cause problems with teams made up of people from cultures with different degrees of power difference.

It may be difficult to ascertain the correct level of address by asking people directly. In many collectivist cultures you won't get an answer if you ask "is it ok to use first names" or you get a positive answer no matter what the feelings behind.

For people from cultures with high power distance, at the team's creation, define the rules of how people will be addressed and treated in email communication.

Protocols and formalities regarding levels of politeness and how to address one another should be discussed.

Advise team members that the best way to find out the proper protocol is to start really formal (like a formal business letter) and react if your (collectivist) partner changes to something more informal

		<p>Some people are very terse and informal in emails. This can come across as rude, angry or impersonal. Problem may occur in teams with members from cultures that differ on the scale of male/female cultures.</p> <p>Email is useful when you want a quick response, but if the question is not framed correctly it can damage the relationship</p>	<p>There should be alternatives to email available to resolve misunderstandings and to provide higher degrees of confidentiality.</p> <p>Advise team members to step back and consider how the messages they send may be interpreted. When they receive messages that appear offensive, they should also try to consider what the sender's actual intent may have been, taking into account possible culturally based misunderstandings.</p> <p>Sometimes team members need to be reminded to "blow off some steam" before answering an email that makes them angry or upset.</p>
<p>DISCUSSION FORUMS</p>	<p>Can be a useful tool in preparing specific plans and goals and setting the topics that the team will address.</p>		

Because you can access discussion forums at your convenience, this is good tool for people from poly- and monochromic cultures to work with together.

The tool may be flexible enough to allow the incorporation of images, sounds, and other rich media. This may be useful to team members who prefer high-context communication media.

People can easily fall behind if they are not able to participate as much as other team members.

People may find that this is not a very efficient medium to use for various tasks. This problem may especially arise with people from more individualistic cultures. Others may be frustrated because the tool's emphasis on conversation and relationships do not always lead to efficient action.


The team leader of facilitator needs to pay attention to the pace of the discussion and participants need to commit to regularly checking in to the discussion.

Encourage the use of images and other media within the discussions so that people with different preferences will be comfortable with the medium.

It is important to control the number of people involved and to carefully organize the topics being discussed.

In addition to developing relationships among the team members, the group needs to explicitly focus on accomplishing its goals.

Discussion forums are not necessarily a good choice for action or decision making. Use other tools for these tasks.



Team members from more collective cultures or ones with high levels of power distance may find it difficult to participate in the discussions unless the relationship has been very long, very trusting and very safe, and if the people participating were all on the same level of hierarchy (otherwise people may not feel comfortable saying anything different than the boss)

CHAT &
INSTANT
MESSAGING

The quick pace and shorthand style of synchronous chat communication may be problematic for people communicating outside of their first language.

These are fast paced, so all participants need to respect and value that there are different levels of comprehension, but at least you can ask for clarification if you do not understand.

Encourage team members to ask for clarification when they do not understand acronyms or slang terms that are being used.


Post glossaries of common acronyms and slang. For example:

"ga" = "go ahead." When used at the end of a posting in a chat, indicates that you have finished your comment/question and another participant may proceed with their posting.

For more **polychronic** people, chat/IM can be an excellent way to talk about multiple things in an unstructured way.

If there isn't an agenda set in advance, the chat may be frustrating and unproductive for **individualistic** or **monochronic** people

If using any charts/printed material, copies should be sent in advance to all chat participants. Having a copy of the agenda is even more important than usual for following the discussion and preparing any ideas or comments.

		<p>It may be difficult to schedule synchronous chats across multiple time zones.</p>	<p>Try to schedule synchronous events at a time that causes the least discomfort for everyone involved. Be aware of different culture's attitudes towards time and punctuality.</p>
	<p>Chats can be a quick and collective way to facilitate personal interactions and to create a sense of team.</p>	<p>People from more individualistic cultures may view team building through chats/IM as time wasted.</p>	<p>In order to accommodate people from more collective cultures, you can build in time for warm-ups and chitchat, but can also have a firm agenda that can then move on so other participants are not frustrated.</p> <p>It is important that someone take responsibility for summarizing the data and discussions that come out of chat sessions. These can be in the form of brief updates which can then be used for the next chat session, project updates, etc.</p>

		<p>Instant Messaging may bother team members with a monochronic sense of time and activity – they may not enjoy messages popping up and interrupting their train of thought while they are working on something else.</p> <p>If there are some people who are in one location and others conference in, people may feel left out of the call.</p> <p>There is nothing worse for a virtual person than to sit and listen as an outsider and not be included in the conversation.</p>	<p>Discuss usage when the team is formed. Encouraged people to set their messaging software to indicate when they do not wish to be interrupted.</p> <p>It is important to have a meeting facilitator at the location.</p> <p>This facilitator should remind people of other team members that are on the phone and make that everyone has an opportunity to speak and voice their opinion on each issue.</p>
<p>TELE- CONFERENCE</p>	<p>Teleconferencing can be a useful tool to get parties to talk. Again an agenda, or prebriefing makes it more useful.</p>		<p>Having someone chair the conference is essential, if all parties are to contribute and be heard.</p>



Participants need to be comfortable with the language being used in the telephone conference because the conversation is often rapid and there is no time to look up words.

One can easily see the differences between the languages of high and low context.

The time differences can be an inconvenient for the teleconference.

When there are linguistic barriers, forums provide time to use translation services, dictionaries, or other tools.

Participants must be reminded to speak slowly and without using slang or jargon.

One needs to remember that the best communication is simple and concrete.

Choose the language best suited to the needs and competencies of the team.

Allow the group to become comfortable with the medium. Try not to only use the tool when there are problems and the "things are burning" because the member of the team may be wary of participating if they are not used to it.

Try to schedule synchronous events at a time that causes the least discomfort for everyone involved. Be aware of different culture's attitudes towards time and punctuality.

	<p>On a telephone conference, one can almost feel the feelings of all of the members of the team. This medium can be a middle point between email and face-to-face communication.</p>	<p>If there are some people who are in one location and others conference in, people may feel left out of the call.</p> <p>There is nothing worse for a virtual person than to sit and listen as an outsider and not be included in the conversation.</p> <p>Some team members may perceive the teleconference as an expensive and unnecessary luxury that could be replaced by other means of communication.</p>	<p>It is important to have a meeting facilitator at the location.</p> <p>This facilitator should remind people of other team members that are on the phone and make that everyone has an opportunity to speak and voice their opinion on each issue.</p> <p>If using any charts/printed material, copies should be sent in advance to all teleconference participants. Having a copy of the agenda is even more important than usual for following the discussion and preparing any ideas or comments.</p>
<p>VIDEO CONFERENCING</p>	<p>A group video conference can make a meeting into a real event/occasion where you are expected to be present (since you can be seen). It reinforces the group as an actual entity.</p> <p>Video conferencing is useful at the inception of a team to help put a face to each person. It is also a good medium for people to use to ask questions.</p>	<p>The combination of the problems inherent in the media with language concerns may make it difficult for people to understand one another.</p>	<p>Have people speak slower than they usually would.</p>

People from more **collective cultures** often favor this, and other high-context media, over email and discussion forums.

For people from **high context** cultures, this media may provide additional clues to meaning and reaction since one can watch the participants' expressions and gestures.

If group members are comfortable communicating in a common language, video conferencing can be a good media for group discussions or presentations of information.

The people from **individualistic cultures** may think that videoconferencing is an expensive and unnecessary luxury that can be replaced by collective conferences.

Unfortunately, the technology is still limited so it is not as good as seeing those reactions face-to-face.

When there are linguistic barriers, these conferences can be much less effective and possibly even hurt the team dynamics, particularly among participants from more collective cultures. For example, most Japanese are very uncomfortable when talking in English, and this feeling heightens when they are picked out like an actor on a screen

Use a variety of different media for different purposes.

Younger people from more collective cultures are often more open to video conferences outside of their first language, but they are usually not the ones allowed to speak as they are not high enough on the **hierarchical** ladder.

		<p>May be difficult to schedule synchronous video conferences across multiple time zones.</p> <p>Can be very expensive.</p>	<p>Try to schedule synchronous events at a time that causes the least discomfort for everyone involved. Be aware of different culture's attitudes towards time and punctuality.</p> <p>To maximize the time, cost and effort , one thing that helps is if people have an agenda or at least the outcomes for the flow of the conversation. They can go off track other wise.</p>
<p>FACE TO FACE MEETINGS</p>	<p>Face to face meetings are a good way to build relationships, something particularly important to people from more collective cultures, but essential to all teams.</p>	<p>Participants need to be comfortable with the language being used in the meeting because the conversation is often rapid and there is no time to look up words.</p>	<p>When there are linguistic barriers, forums provide time to use translation services, dictionaries, or other tools. Participants must be reminded to speak slowly and without using slang or jargon.</p>

	<p>Can be effective in the early stages of a team to help build trust among the team members.</p> <p>Good for dealing with sensitive and complex situations.</p>	<p>It can be prohibitively expensive to gather the dispersed team members into one location for a face-to-face meeting.</p>	<p>If the resources are available to meet, it may be more beneficial to use them when the team is formed. Good facilitation can make a big difference in the effectiveness of the meeting.</p> <p>If team members are not accustomed to working in cross-cultural groups, some diversity/cultural training may help the group overcome misunderstandings.</p>
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