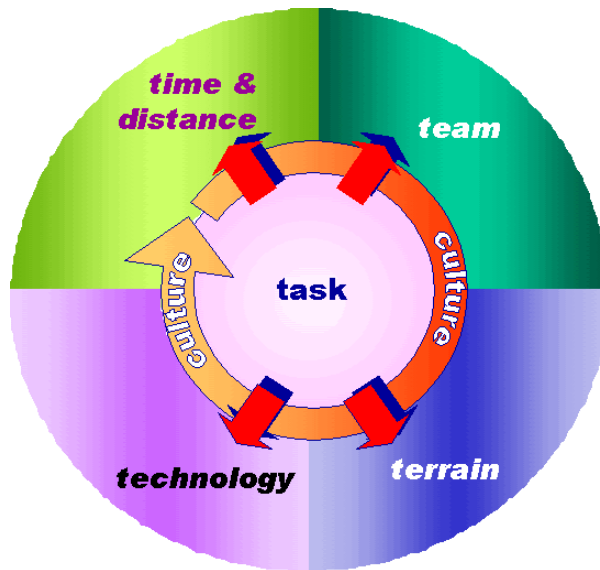


Getting value added from cultural diversity & virtual teamwork

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Imagine virtual global teamwork as a wheel. At its center is the *axle*. It is the task that we need to do to support our business or organization and keep it rolling forward. Getting a complex business task done is the reason for forming a team.



The wheel itself has four parts. These are the four sets of challenges that we have to deal with successfully to balance the wheel so it can roll along smoothly. If you have been working virtually you are no doubt already aware of some of these challenges:

1. How *time and distance* change how we must lead, work and manage virtual team projects together.
2. How we form and maintain a high performing diverse *team*
3. How we manage the *terrain* or context in which our team works. This means making sure the organization and other stakeholders recognize, understand, support and reward virtual teamwork and virtual team workers.
4. How to choose the right *technology* and use it appropriately both to do the business task and keep the team effective.

In order to meet these virtual teamwork challenges, these five T's, there is one more critical factor, *culture*. Culture can either be “grit” or “grease.” It can slow down the wheel, or be used to help it move along more smoothly. Here are examples of how culture as “grit” can stall the wheel (-) and culture as “grease” make it move more smoothly (+).

1. Task definition:

- A product design team based solely in the USA continually suggests designs that do not fit with the usage and aesthetic requirements of European markets.
 - + A pan-European marketing effort is earmarked for virtual teamwork, with a stipulation that team members be chosen on their ability to represent target markets. Using online forums, individuals on the team will serve as informants not only to understand specific cultural requirements, but also to see how ideas from each culture may enrich the marketing approach of the others.
2. Time and distance:
- A mixed European and Middle East team works virtually and unproductively for six months. When they finally meet for the first time face to face to discuss this crisis, they discover that there is not a single language that is understood and spoken well enough by everyone in the team to hold an effective meeting. The team is broken up.
 - + Careful attention is paid to understand time differences in the workday and life styles of a global management team and synchronous events are timed in such a way that the inconvenience of needing to work at odd hours is fairly distributed. Each team member feels respected and valued.
3. Team formation and performance:
- Norwegian team members give feedback in a direct and impersonal fashion that causes Filipino team members to lose face and motivation. The Filipinos give feedback politely and indirectly, but the Norwegians fail to notice it.
 - + A manufacturing firm dedicates 10 hours of teleconferencing time per week to be used for teambuilding and decision-making on a virtual “face-to-face” basis.
- Terrain:
 - + Engineers in The Hague want to take decisions directly with their counterparts in Lagos. The Dutch are frustrated because all communications must pass through the head of the engineering department in Lagos, who is not an engineer. The Nigerian engineers are put in an embarrassing position because the Dutch fail to go through the right channels.
 - + Team members in four different countries create an online forum in which they explain to each other how decisions are made at each of their locations and the time usually required for this to happen.
- Technology:
 - Team members in Italy prefer phones and teleconferences for discussing new ideas, while their British counterparts prefer email and online forums. The Italians feel that this stifles creativity. Neither side is communicating effectively.
 - + A German and Japanese team meets weekly on line to discuss their process of working together. As a result of this the set norms and conventions for who needs what information in each context and thus reduces the information overload they

have been experiencing in their email, without omitting important communications.

You also can turn diversity on a virtual team to your advantage. With the above examples in mind, ask yourself:

- What business tasks or projects and processes in my organization would benefit by being virtualized and distributed to a global team?
- How can being a diverse team in different time zones add value to a process?
- What do my virtual team members have to tell each other in order make their culture visible, to learn from each other and take advantage of their variety?
- How can I make sure that others in my organization understand what virtual teams are doing and how they contribute to everyone's success?
- What training do my people need to use their technology effectively in each of their cultural contexts?