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Challenges Faced and Practical Techniques for Managing a Dispersed Team

Abstract: This paper, which was written by Rona Blair, is drawn from her presentation at the 2015 BIALL Annual Conference. The article looks at the challenges of working in a geographically dispersed team and how to overcome these challenges using pragmatic and workable procedures.
Keywords: dispersed teams; virtual teams; communication; law libraries; library management

INTRODUCTION

Working in a team that is geographically dispersed, or a virtual team, can be challenging. Collaboration, co-operation and connectivity were the key themes at the 2015 BIALL Annual Conference and are all key components of a successful team. Communication is also crucial to the success of any team and vital if your team is not in the same location. This article will look firstly at some of the challenges of working in geographically dispersed teams and then identify practical solutions, simple tips and strategies to help overcome some of these challenges.

CHALLENGES

A decade ago, global virtual teams were not common; today it could almost be viewed as rare not to be part of a global team spread across different countries, time zones and cultures. The Telework Research Network states that there are currently 2.9 million full-time virtual workers in the USA; an incredible 61% increase since 2005.[1] The boundaries of geography and time have really been broken down by technological advances, but in 2015 virtual *everything* is the norm and this may well include your colleagues and co-workers.

Whilst we may have continually evolving technology at our fingertips, these exciting times are not without their challenges, especially for teams that are geographically dispersed. Research shows that only 10% of communication is words, 30–35% is tone and 55–60% is body language. When you work in the same office as your colleagues 'things happen that quite simply cannot be replicated if you work dispersed'.[2] According to Marissa Mayer CEO of Yahoo, people are more "collaborative and innovative when they're together."[3] This was on the back of her somewhat controversial decision to discontinue the company's popular work from home policy back in 2013.

Such is the phenomenon of geographically dispersed teams that one of the world's largest graduate business schools, INSEAD runs a five day course on Managing Global Virtual Teams. Erin Meyer, the Programme Director says: "Teamwork is not just about communication, it is also about cooperation and cooperation requires trust between team members. It is difficult for humans to trust people that they don't frequently see face to face. If I can't look in your eyes and see your facial expressions or get to know you beyond your voice on the phone, it is harder for me to judge if you are trustworthy. A high level of trust between team members is one of the most important factors to efficient collaboration. If the team leader does not invest significant time and energy in finding ways to build trust amongst team members who rarely see one another, trust is likely to remain low."[4]

We can see, therefore, that creating a culture of trust is the key to success of any team. We might be more familiar with having colleagues in a different city, being able to work from home or having smaller teams and solo workers as part of our wider team, but what about the trickier dimensions where your colleagues are in different countries with no overlapping time zones and vastly different cultures? For teams to communicate well and achieve their strategic objectives and goals, it is vital to ensure that no one feels isolated, everyone is treated fairly and that a community of trust and respect is created.

KNOWLEDGE TEAM AT PINSENT MASONS LLP

At Pinsent Masons we have a Library and Research team. The Library is responsible for the hard copy collections

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for the firm – procurement and maintenance of all books, loose-leafs, journals and building contracts. We provide a document supply enquiry service, training and have responsibility for all copyright licences and policies. The Research team are responsible for the procurement of all online subscriptions and training. They provide a legal enquiry service and also have a strong focus on providing business intelligence – including client profiles, sector research and competitor intelligence.

The Library team is 8 strong and we are responsible for 8 libraries in the UK. We also work closely with the Librarian in Hong Kong and provide assistance to fee earners worldwide. The Library team is based in four of the UK offices, with 2 solo workers, 2 teams of 3 and 2 part-time workers. Regular travel is made to support our colleagues in the unmanned offices.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

There are many different ways to best manage our different dynamics and work effectively as a team.

Face to face meetings with your team are excellent ways to help build trust and allow a team to bond. However, when teams are so widespread it can be expensive. Certainly for our team such meetings would only be able to take place once a year at the very most.

On those rare occasions that you do get to have a face to face team meeting, it is crucial to prepare well, with an agenda sent out in advance. This allows everyone to prepare ahead of time with no time wasted.

Team building exercises can be worthwhile on such occasions and there are many short exercises available that can help break the ice and encourage the team to work together in different ways. One such exercise is *Zoom*, a thirty minute exercise designed to build communication which uses the wordless, picture book entitled *Zoom* by Istvan Banyai. The team are each given an individual picture card, depicting an element of a story. Together they describe and discuss each card to decipher the correct sequence of events. We used this exercise for a fairly new team, meeting for the first time. It was very successful, particularly to see the different individual styles of communicating within the team.

Assuming that team meetings don't happen often, how can we best manage our different team dynamics to work effectively together?

Team Calls

We have weekly team calls at the same time every week to discuss our workloads and gain a clear picture of what is happening in each office. When a team is dispersed it is crucial that everyone is aware, just as you would be if all working in the same location. Originally I ran each meeting and we discussed everything that had been covered in the past week and the key points coming up. It became clear, however, that there wasn't enough focus, so rather than discuss all of the mundane tasks that we all know we do, we now focus on our 3 biggest tasks for the week. At the end there is time for any other business and if necessary, further calls or meetings are arranged including only those that need to be involved. We all need to know what is happening on a broader level but once you work in a team of a certain size we can't all know the exact details of every project and process. This is where trust comes into play – essential in any team, particularly a dispersed one. Our team policy is an open and honest one. Mistakes get made but the sooner it is addressed the better, and often it illustrates a flaw in one of our processes, allowing us to improve it. The team also now take it in turns to lead the meeting which has allowed the more junior members of the team to build their confidence in a relaxed environment.

Meetings

It's easy to be sceptical about meetings – after all there is nothing worse than sitting through a meeting that is a total waste of time. At a TED conference in 2010, Jason Fried tells his audience "Why work doesn't happen at work". He discusses how people often have their best ideas out of the office and suggests "no talk Thursday" where there are no calls and no talking. There is just silence, in order for people to have uninterrupted periods of time to really think and to work without distraction. Interestingly he also suggests that using more passive models of communication such as email and instant messaging should be encouraged. They might be distracting, but as he says, they can be distracting at a time of your own choice and your own choosing – you can quit the email app; you can't quit your boss. You can quit instant messenger; you can't hide from your manager. Rather more radically, he also suggests that we get rid of M&Ms altogether – don't worry, not the chocolate ones, but far more appealing – managers and meetings.[5] Jason has some really interesting ideas, especially surrounding having uninterrupted time to work. Like everything though, it's about getting the balance right and of course it depends on what type of job you do. Because I would like to keep my job, I think we still have to have managers and meetings, but make sure you schedule all your meetings, don't be late, stick to the agenda and keep it focussed. This way, you are not wasting time but instead connecting with your colleagues and team effectively.

I have weekly meetings with the Senior Library Officers in Glasgow and London. As managers it is an excellent opportunity for us to catch up and discuss any confidential matters that may have arisen. I sit beside one of the Senior Library Managers and because of this we didn't have a formal weekly meeting. Recently however we have implemented a set meeting time and we go into a meeting room which has really helped us to focus and prioritise more efficiently.

Like most firms we have an appraisal procedure in place during which time the year is reviewed and new

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goals and objectives are set out for the year ahead. But how do we stick to these objectives and ensure they are carried out sensibly throughout the year? Monthly objective meetings are an excellent way to keep progress on track. Each meeting is structured around the annual objectives that have been set, so very much focussed on the bigger picture. The objectives are then discussed and broken down into monthly tasks. This way everyone is working towards their individual goals steadily throughout the year, and in turn the whole team successfully meets their goals. In our case, these feed in to the broader Central Knowledge Management and overall strategies of the firm. It is an excellent way to monitor progress and just touch base with the team. As it charts the achievements of the team as the year progresses the team remain inspired and motivated throughout.

Clear processes

Vital to the smooth running of any team, especially to those that are geographically dispersed, is making sure that you have clear processes in place. We have a shared team calendar in outlook which has our enquiry service rota, holidays, working patterns, office visits and meetings. We also include project work, allowing everyone in the team to see that although the person is in the office, ideally they should not be interrupted. This allows them to dedicate time to important work. It is simply another way of raising awareness and making sure the team is quite literally on the same page. Use your voicemail and out of office properly, making sure it is always current and up to date. Clear processes for holidays and sick leave are also essential.

Difficult Topics

Dealing with difficult topics is never easy and can be challenging when you work in a dispersed team. Such matters need to be dealt with professionally, in an empathetic manner and as promptly as possible. Where workable, try and have such meetings in person and take advice from HR. Also be prepared – have a list of potential solutions to work through which can put a positive slant on what is potentially a negative situation. It is essential to be calm and professional when dealing with difficult topics. Let the other person have their say, listen carefully and hopefully a suitable solution can be achieved. If you already have trust and respect within the team, it is likely that at difficult times this respect will be returned.

COLLABORATION

Good collaboration can really help build team relations. Where possible try and encourage collaboration between those who don't work in the same offices. A recent project allowed our team to bear the fruits of such collaboration. Our Library Officer in Leeds took the lead on an auditing project that involved four colleagues in four different offices. She led the mini project team using a mixture of email, conference calls and jabber to successfully complete the project in a timely fashion. It might be tempting to give this sort of work to a team member that sits beside you but not only is it unfair, it also demonstrates a lack of trust. The role of a manager is to encourage the team to work well together, but I believe the onus is on us all. We all have to take responsibility and ownership of our team and contribute accordingly.

Personalities

Another big factor in the success of a team, geographically dispersed or not, is to take into account different personalities. Personalities can make for some really interesting team dynamics; some people love working on their own, others couldn't entertain the idea. At interview stage this is something you have to be really clear about. Your candidate may be joining a team, but on a day to day basis they are working solo and representing the Library in that particular office. At this early stage, it is really important to consider where they will be sitting, office introductions, setting up an office buddy to help out in the early days and also training on team procedures. You might be on your own, but there is definitely no need to feel excluded.

Where possible I believe it is sensible to play to the strengths of your team. For example, if there is someone in the team who enjoys training and someone who does not (and it absolutely does not matter who does it) then let the person who enjoys it do it. If we are doing something we really enjoy it is likely that we will do a far better job and be more engaged and motivated.

What if you have team members that don't see eye to eye? It's unlikely that every single person in a team is going to get on a like a house on fire and Mark de Rond, a Reader in Strategy and Organisation at Cambridge Judge Business School at the University of Cambridge thinks that likeability or harmony within a team can actually hamper performance. He studies teams of high performers for example, the crew of the Cambridge boat race and a team of surgeons in Camp Bastion in Afghanistan by living with them full time. Evidence shows that teams who get on really well personally perform worse (partly because they feel safer so they are more relaxed about making mistakes and forgiving of each other). However, what you do need is mutual respect and trust within a team for it to be able to perform well.[6]

TRAINING AND NETWORKING

Another aspect of working in a team to consider is training and networking. We need to take responsibility for our own development and if your workplace offers any opportunities for training, take advantage of it. It is always good to learn something new, to network and to

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meet up with people in your organisation. This is beneficial for everyone but especially for solo workers. Such opportunities are brilliant for meeting other colleagues and profile-raising.

Networking has huge benefits especially if you are working on your own and organisations like BIALL, the SLLG in Scotland and ALLICE in the Midlands (to name only a few) are excellent for engaging and connecting with others who work in your field. Participating in networking events/professional events will go a long way to stop you feeling isolated and ensure that you feel part of a team.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology plays a huge part in the success of working in a dispersed team. Without its advances virtual teams would not exist. The Library team at Pinsent Masons have used the following technologies effectively:

Video conferencing

Video conferencing may not provide the end users with the most natural experience but it does allow parties who cannot be in the same location some level of face to face communication. VC works better for smaller groups and our team meets twice a year using VC, with positive results.

Cisco Jabber

Cisco jabber is a set of applications that allows the users to connect with each other through instant messaging, voice, video, conferencing and desk top sharing. In a nutshell it is a unified communications tool allowing you to collaborate more effectively with colleagues. Jabber lets the user communicate through a variety of formats and devices which is extremely useful, especially as workplaces become more agile. The instant messaging function allows you to have quick and informal discussions with your colleagues that do not clog up your inbox. It displays in such a way that you can see instantly if someone in your team is on a call or in a meeting. Jabber can also be used in place of your desk phone; all that is required is a headset for your laptop. It's a seamless, hands free process. For example, we have recently opened up offices in Australia where there is no overlap in working hours and I have been able to make calls from home exactly replicating my work desk. Jabber also has video functionality which means any time I have meetings with team members we can have face to face communication on a regular basis. No meeting rooms with VC availability are required; instead, just a few clicks of your mouse. Jabber allows us to be flexible with our communications which is vital if we work in a dispersed team.

Our workplaces vary enormously. Make the most of the technologies that are available to you and make sure you explore all your options, allowing you to keep up to date and connected with your fellow professionals.

CONCLUSION

There are so many different ways of communicating effectively and working well together when your team is geographically dispersed. What works for one team might not suit another. It is vital to always keep it fresh. Something that worked for a while may become jaded, or a dynamic in the team changes which means something you did before no longer works.

Most importantly, the key to success is having clear objectives and trusting your team. Trust evolves differently in virtual teams. In an office setting, colleagues build relationships and trust through social interaction and collaborative work. Researchers call this benevolent or interpersonal trust. However, in a virtual team, colleagues build trust through reliability, consistency, and responsiveness – this is called ability-based, or task-based trust. To build trust, start by keeping your word. If you agree on a deadline, or you make a promise to call a teammate, follow up on what you say. When you demonstrate your integrity and work ethic, your team members will learn that they can rely on you.[7] And remember to communicate. If you communicate well without wasting time your team will work well. Above all, commit to communicate – all of the solutions and processes that have been considered can be achieved if planned and diarised carefully. Your team are just as important as the deadlines you have to meet, if not more so. A successful team means that you can provide a smooth service, achieve your objectives and work collaboratively in a professional and respectful manner.

Footnotes

[1] https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/working-virtual-team.htm
[2] http://www.forbes.com/sites/georgebradt/2015/01/21/team-geographically-dispersed-leverage-all-senses-to-keep-connected/
[3] http://fortune.com/2013/04/19/marissa-mayer-breaks-her-silence-on-yahoos-telecommuting-policy
[4] http://executive-education.insead.edu/managing_global_virtual_teams
[5] http://www.ted.com/talks/jason_fried_why_work_doesn_t_happen_at_work/transcript?language=en
[6] The Art and Science of High Performing Teams, Dr Mark de Rond: Notes form Moller PSF Client Day 22/05/14.
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Biography

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The Library Without Walls: Striving for an Excellent Law Library Service Post-Earthquake

Abstract: This paper is adapted from a presentation given by Sara Roberts at the 2015 BIALL Annual Conference. On September 4th 2010 Christchurch suffered the first of a series of catastrophic earthquakes which continued over the next two years and damaged much of the city. During this time the University of Canterbury suffered greatly, both through physical damage to the campus and from a loss of students willing to come and study in Christchurch. Subsequently, the dedicated Law Library on campus was closed and it was necessary to reassess the service in the light of severely reduced resources. More than four years on from that first earthquake, the law collection is situated in the central library on campus, and the number of professional law librarians supporting the service has reduced from four to two. Yet despite the changes the service has not diminished and, indeed, is stronger in some areas.
Keywords: disaster recovery; business continuity planning; academic libraries; law libraries; New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

From 2010 to 2012 Christchurch, New Zealand endured over 11,000 earthquakes[1]. The city changed beyond recognition as landmark buildings were demolished and many people moved away to start again. No part of life in the city was unaffected by the disaster and my workplace, the University of Canterbury, suffered badly. This article will address the changes forced upon the University of Canterbury Library, and particularly the closure of the dedicated Law Library.

I will briefly describe the situation in 2010 at the University and the changes that were already underway when the first earthquake hit, how the earthquakes changed our expectations and forced us to take a new approach to the provision of a law library service, and what that service looks like now, five years later.

LAW SCHOOL AND LIBRARY IN 2010

The Law School at the University of Canterbury has around 900 students and 20 academic staff. In 2010 the law library occupied two floors of the Law Building in a custom built library which opened in 1993. There was a Law Librarian who managed three law information librarians, four library assistants, and after-hours staff to cover the extended opening times.

We had dedicated staff to manage the many tasks in the library that were particular to law, for example, the management of bills, statutes, receiving of law reports, parliamentary publications, and the binding of serials . The Law Librarian was still actively developing the monograph collection, which had been much depleted when she took over almost 20 years previously, and our mission was to be the best academic law library in New Zealand.

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