

11/06/09 - Operating Globally

"Global Experience Needed." What does that mean?

Having had the opportunity to lead projects in Sydney, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing, London and Cleveland (I can say that, I was raised there!), working globally isn't really all that hard. Some basics will help you navigate.

- **People are people** ? around the world, people want to do a good job. They need to know what you need to help you be successful.
- **Global Companies are not Global** ? Global companies are made up of various legal entities and while they may share the same logo, local practices often differ from country to country. Be specific. Don't assume one company acts one way.

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Global Companies often outsource ? Large multinational companies have a web of local suppliers to deliver services. Find out who is specifically doing the work, and how they are going to be managed. Be clear on whom to hold accountable. This is particular true of communications companies...where the "last mile" is often a "local" provider (often impervious to SLAs established in faraway places.)

Of particular concern is measuring deliverables. The adage, "Trust and Verify" fits. In some areas of the world, it is unacceptable to discuss project delays. So the status will be positive right up until the missed delivery. As you might expect, people missing status updates is often a red flag for issues.

- **Be specific on specifications** ? don't assume anything. Paper sizes are different, power attributes are different, codes are different ("Exit" signs in Beijing must be near the floor. When you think about it, that's a sensible location especially in a fire!), and "standards" are different. Take the time to make sure everyone is talking the same thing.

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Look for nuances in language ? Make sure there is tacit agreement. While English is often the language of business around the world, be respectful to the party you are speaking with. They may not

understand colloquialisms or humor. It's not (always) a lack of a sense of humor, they may need to translate the English to their language and the translation may not be 100%. So when asking parties to agree on something, it's often useful to ask the other party in the conversation to "summarize the point."

Direct confrontation is avoided in some cultures. Care should be used when the discussion could lead to embarrassment. If you sense this is happening, offer to follow up separately.

The same rules around email apply here as well. When an email exchange begins around a topic, and a "point-counterpoint" ensues (especially with a lengthy periodic cycle), a quick conversation is indicated.

- **Meeting times must be flexible** ? Depending on your worldly needs, someone is going to be inconvenienced. Most projects will start out "bouncing" meeting times so everyone is inconvenienced from time to time. The complexities of this shifting rapidly lead everyone to the same conclusion, pick a time and stick to it. This means US based staff team members may need to participate in the evening, and vice versa. Keeping good meeting minutes is very important since some people may be tired and not always at their best.

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Learn some of the local cultural attributes ? This shouldn't be a massive educational undertaking, more of an internet research exercise. Start with the CIA's reference <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

What you are trying to do is learn about the local culture. You don't want to unknowingly create a faux pax (For example, asking someone from India to attend a steak dinner. The cow is sacred in Hinduism. Need a quick meal in Hong Kong? KFC is the largest restaurant chain there.)

- **You can work 24 hours a day** ? assuming different timezones, at minimum you can day extend work on a project. Having handoffs between teams on a "follow the sun" model is important. Keeping documents "in order" is imperative (SharePoint, DocuShare, Google Docs and the like are great tools to help.) Knowing who has the baton at any point in time helps prevent overlap or wasted work.

- **There are great Communications tools** ? Cisco and Polycom offer

high end videoconferencing. Not everyone will have this gear at home! There are other low end solutions (Skype, ooVoo and others) will allow team members to conference in. Video is great for meetings under an hour, and over video becomes mind numbing.

VoIP allows low cost calling virtually wherever there's a network. Some companies have VoIP phone systems; others can use Skype, Vonage or Google Talk.

Operating globally is a mix of common sense, heightened manners, and sensitivity. Projects are accomplished every day. Success is achieved by those taking the time to understand the differences and making goals, roles and responsibilities clear.

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