Optimizing Your Global Virtual Workforce for Success

Carol M. Sanchez  
*Grand Valley State University, sanchezc@gvsu.edu*

Rebekah Arndt  
*Amadeus*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/sbr

**Recommended Citation**  
Sanchez, Carol M. and Arndt, Rebekah (2020) "Optimizing Your Global Virtual Workforce for Success,"  
*Seidman Business Review: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.*  
Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/sbr/vol26/iss1/9
Michigan is the sixth largest exporter among the fifty states, with nearly US$60 billion worth of goods sold to customers in foreign countries each year. Some 15,000 Michigan businesses sell products overseas, affecting over a quarter of a million jobs nationally, and 6% of the Michigan workforce earns a paycheck, thanks to a foreign employer. Michiganders are enmeshed in the global economy, and many are members of global virtual workforces that collaborate across international borders. But how effective are these global virtual workforces? We spoke with associates of several West Michigan companies who do business across borders, and suggest ways to help global virtual workforces be successful.

Doing business internationally with a global virtual workforce
Doing business outside the home country is an ambitious proposition. Michigan and U.S. companies that operate or sell products in foreign markets may experience a “liability of foreignness,” meaning that a lack of knowledge and experience of the foreign market may render them poorer results compared with local firms, and possibly a greater chance of failure (Zaheer, 1995). To help mitigate this effect, firms often recruit dedicated international associates in the foreign country to become members of global virtual teams: as an example, U.S.-based multinational companies have an average ratio of native to foreign workers of 3:1. Often made up of middle managers and technicians in several countries, the global virtual team spans national borders, spends little if any time physically together, and works interdependently on day-to-day tasks using mostly virtual, electronic platforms. Associates engage daily with other team members who may be oceans away, in different time zones, speak different languages, and represent different cultures, values, and beliefs.

Since global virtual workforces are becoming more common, managing them well is critical because of the logistic, linguistic, and cultural barriers that team members must overcome. We propose that there are three ways companies can help their global virtual teams reduce the company’s “liability of foreignness” and improve results:

1. Select technology with the users in mind -- and do not rely on it 100%.
The first way companies can help their global virtual teams is to choose technology wisely. Successful global virtual teams thrive when there is vibrant communication, interaction, trust, clarity of task, clarity of team goals, and when they build a global team-based body of knowledge (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001). Collaborative technology is essential, and a company should select its communication platform with care -- not just from an optimal workflow perspective, but also for its user reliability, speed, and richness of content. Virtual workers gauge the trustworthiness of their employer by the quality and effectiveness of the technology they must use (Ford et al., 2017), and they rely on technology to gain one another’s trust, support and transparency among associates on the team. One of our conversations involved a global systems architect at a West Michigan insurance giant, who told us that the necessary features of an effective global technology platform include time stamps that automatically adjust to the user’s local time, a user profile section that indicates a person’s home base, and a team calendar that considers local holidays. “When my team understands one another’s geographical location and the implications that has on the work day, concerns around response time are reduced, and expectations become clear,” he explains.

However, the team should not rely on technology for all employee exchanges. Another manager emphasized the importance of travel, because physical time spent together forges stronger relationships. He noted that businesses that invest in travel for their associates close more deals. In fact, a report by the U.S. Travel Association estimates that in-person meetings generated 25% more business than forgoing them (Oxford Economics, 2009). Live, internal meetings among members of the global virtual team are also beneficial, because they build and sustain ongoing virtual collaboration and positively affect employee retention and job satisfaction ratings.

2. Help navigate cultural differences
A second way companies can help global virtual teams be successful is to help them navigate cultural differences. Cultural differences emerge as global virtual team associates get to know and depend on one another. And while it is a welcome gesture to show interest in a foreign colleague’s unique holidays and traditions, it is more important to recognize that these represent deeply held beliefs and values that may not be evident. Cross-cultural miscommunication may occur over time when people holding different values engage regularly: at first, a person may have a vague realization that something about the other person seems different. It is an uncomfortable and sometimes painful feeling, but recognizing the difference
is key. At times like this, it might be useful for people to pause, take a step back, and use a technique called Positive Indifference, which is the ability “to engage with something that makes you uncomfortable, but stay positive, while diminishing resistance to it” (Neeley, 2017). Another West Michigan manager described such an experience that occurred when his Indian team visited the company’s U.S. headquarters. The team was made up of highly trained computer engineers who were accustomed to being waited on during their workday in India: for example, a lower level employee served them fresh water when their glasses ran low. It was surprising, then, that in the U.S., not only did they not receive water service (or any service), but their boss got his own water! In the U.S., where equality at work is valued more than rigid hierarchies, such overt displays of power and status are less accepted than they are in India (Hofstede et al, 2010). The Indian associates felt uncomfortable without this display of rank, and U.S. associates were equally uncomfortable knowing that it was someone’s job in the India office to fetch water. Engaging with one another to discuss, understand and accept the values and beliefs that underpin such differences has resulted in greater team harmony.


A third way companies can help their global virtual teams is to adopt inclusive language practices. More than a quarter of the world’s population speaks English as a first or second language, and English is the most widely used language on the planet (Neeley, 2017). This makes it a valuable skill in international business: in Asia, there is intense pressure for employees to speak English in the workplace. Yet, even highly skilled not-native English speakers report they lack the ability to communicate fully when not speaking in their native tongue (Neeley, 2017). To assure full engagement among members of the global virtual workforce, organizations that adopt English as its lead language should encourage team members to ask frequent questions and seek regular clarification, and above all, have patience for speakers who have varied levels of English proficiency. Management should allow extra time for meetings, because they will take longer if not every participant is a native English speaker. They might defer complex input to written communication, thereby giving team members more time to be precise and detailed about their points of view. Native English speakers should speak slowly, simplify vocabulary, encourage their international colleagues to contribute, and not dominate conversations. Indeed, native speakers should avoid conversing and collaborating mainly among themselves, to the exclusion of non-native English speakers. By deliberately engaging with their global associates, native speakers give their foreign colleagues an opportunity to practice and improve their English – benefitting both groups (Neeley, 2017).

Some experts say that being monolingual in English is a liability, because fluency in English suggests that native speakers need not learn other languages. Yet these native speakers will, therefore, always be an outsider to cultures that speak other languages (Hofstede et al, 2010), and they will always learn information about the foreign market second-hand. Learning a new language may seem daunting, but beginner level fluency can be very helpful in international business, and can be learned with a vocabulary of just 1500 words (Neeley, 2017).

A concluding thought

Strategies that promote robust communication, skillful navigation of cultural differences and clarity on language practice can help West Michigan companies that do business internationally create a virtuous cycle of motivation for continuous learning. Companies that encourage cultural learning and language inclusion among global virtual teams can benefit, because improved cross-cultural knowledge among associates begets curiosity, and helps global virtual teams deliver handsome results. Multiple national and regional perspectives are better than singular ones, because diversity of thought facilitates better, more creative and innovation solutions for the company. By adopting key strategies that bundle appropriate digital communication technology, cultural competence, and language practices, global virtual workforces can deliver team success, organizational growth, and help overcome any liability of foreignness the company may have.

References