

GLOBAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES & GUIDELINES

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Global projects have become multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-time zone undertakings for most businesses. In the new millennium, this trend will continue at an increasing rate, and it will demand that new communication skills and techniques be practiced by project managers, and by the members of their team. This paper will share experience gained on recent international projects to illustrate the challenges that exist, to review the lessons learned, and to describe guidelines for avoiding misunderstandings, and for improving communications on international projects.

The international markets have undergone a natural transition as economically developed countries provide the technology, and economically developing countries provide the materials and labor. Consumer demands have forced companies to cut costs while increasing the quality of their products. Improved global satellite and e-mail communications are spawning ever larger groups of informed consumers who seek to participate in a better life for themselves and their families. Global companies are adopting new policies and techniques to deal with these challenges, and to adapt to the new economics considerations resulting from these communication improvements.

In a recent article in the Japan Times titled “*21st Century Calls for Monstrous Change*”, (1) Kenichi Ohamae indicated that competition is increasingly carried out on a regional level rather than a national level. He cites Silicon Valley, Penang, and Bangalore as examples of regions that are thriving while the remainder of the country may be economically flat or even in recession. He postulates that these regions will group together in the future to leverage their advantages, across national and political boundaries.

In our recent experience, Mr. Ohamae is correct. Global firms are moving rapidly to diversify their workforces, moving manufacturing and design to lower cost regions, and recognizing the necessity of having business centers run and managed by nationals rather than expats. These firms are learning how to recognize and manage the challenges that come with such a global diversification.

A word of caution before beginning - cultures are diverse, as are the people of the planet, and the generalizations presented in this paper should be recognized as such for purposes of illuminating the subject in a limited time frame. We have chosen from our experiences on projects in 25 countries, and travel to 55 countries, in presenting the following lessons learned. In doing so we have selected but a few to illustrate the considerations for international project managers.

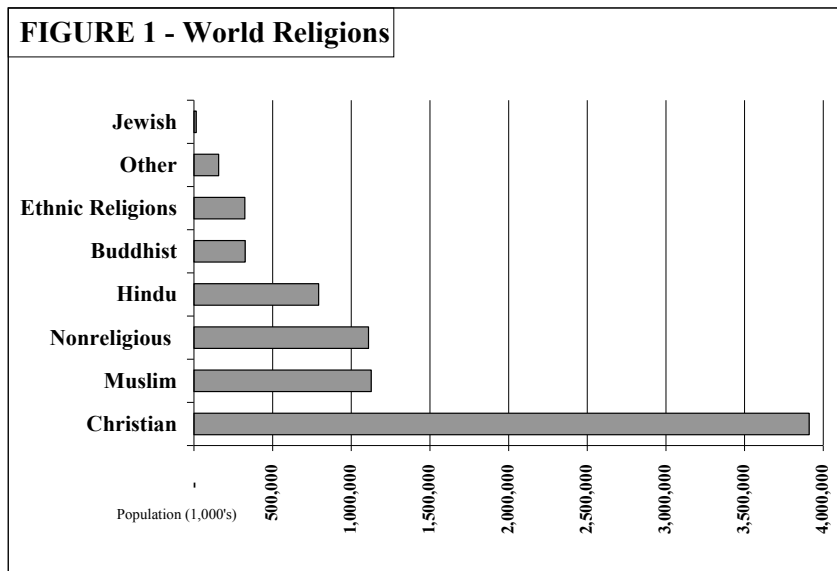
To organize the information we will discuss the Challenges (Religion & Customs, Language, Location, Communication), and then close by suggesting some Guidelines for your projects.

CHALLENGES

RELIGION & CUSTOMS

There are many religions and customs practiced around the globe, each having its own special character, beliefs, and rituals. A general understanding of the religions of the country in which the project is conducted, and the religions of the participants in the project (regardless of their geographical location) will assist in nurturing a team spirit, and will help to avoid lost time and energy.

FIGURE 1 provides demographics of world religions (2). As the graph indicates, a basic understanding of Christians, Muslims, Hindu's, and Buddhists will likely be useful on any project, and a knowledge of other religions such as Shinto (Japan), or Taoism (China), will be



necessary depending upon the participants in the particular project. Teamwork is a critical component to the success of a project, and recognition of, and sensitivity to, the religious beliefs of the project members will nurture personal consideration, which is crucial in building and managing effective teams. Religious beliefs are very personal matters, and personal privacy must be honored and protected. This may be easily accomplished by keeping the interaction on a general and theoretical level. The team

members can then decide themselves how much, if any, of the details of their particular beliefs they share with their peers.

Unfortunately, there are many prejudices and stereotypes that exist, and it is necessary to be informed, and to take reasonable steps to mitigate them. The easiest example is the caste system in India. People born into higher castes (social/religious hierarchy) are not encouraged to mix with lower castes. In Saudi Arabia you cannot enter the country if there is an Israeli stamp in your passport. In Malaysia and Indonesia, people of Chinese heritage are often the business people. Recent strife in Indonesia underscored the social tension present when many of the Chinese shopkeepers were the targets of violence. In Malaysia and Thailand there are still people who remember the Japanese occupation, and may have a decidedly strong feeling about working with expats from Japan. Thus, for smooth communications the project manager must consider how to manage the realities that exist.

In the Muslim world, prayers are offered five times every day, and this must be considered when planning for meetings, conference calls, and dinners. During the holy month of Ramadan, it is not permitted for Muslims to eat, drink, or smoke between sunrise and sunset. In Saudi Arabia for example, everyone including expats has to abide by this rule. Failure to do so can create ill feelings at best, and in Saudi can lead to a stint in jail. Accommodating time for prayers may not directly affect a team member in another country, but it can make a significant impact on operations in-country.

With the requirement to pray facing Mecca, it is necessary to provide a private space in which Muslims may pray, including direction arrows, which show the shortest distance to Mecca. This is a serious consideration when planning meetings outside the Muslim world, and our experience is that providing a private room is appreciated. Furthermore, remember that most Muslims live in Asia, not the middle-east. Most other religions are less demanding regarding prayers, but offering the location of the nearest Hindu shrine or Buddhist temple illustrates concern for the individual and their beliefs.

In the Buddhist world, it is customary to eat only vegetables on Friday. Buddhists are generally lenient by nature, but to eat meat or fish while they are “fasting” can be offensive. Likewise to eat pork in front of a Muslim or Jew can be a display of disregard for their beliefs. Many Hindu’s are vegetarian from birth, and they are not permitted to consume any form of animal product. Most dishes in Thailand are prepared using fish sauce, so imagine the horror of serving, and having a Hindu eat a fish product inadvertently for the first time. In arranging for meetings conducted over meals, care should therefore be taken, and the team members questioned as to their dietary strictures before hand.

For Example, at a recent luncheon in Thailand, we had a group of guests that included Thai’s, Japanese, British, Irish, Hindu’s, and Americans. In planning the menu we considered the vegetarian requirements, the dislike of the Japanese for hot and spicy food, and the preference of the Thai’s for hot and spicy food. It took effort and time to plan the meal, but the good faith and consideration paid handsome benefits back at work.

In Japan it is not unusual for a person to practice Shinto, be married in a Christian church, and to die a Buddhist. So, when invited to a ceremony or when sending a gift or card in Japan, it is necessary to know what type of religious conventions will be used.

In parts of Indonesia, for example, family names are not used. The people tend to know all of their neighbors, and there is no need for anything more than given names. In Myanmar it is customary to use “U” before the first name on business cards, which is not a name but rather a term of formal address such as Mr. In Japan the business card, *meishi*, is a required business tool offered in a prescribed ritual. It should always be presented Japanese side up with both hands, and the card received should be placed on the table for the meeting - never stuck into a back pocket. So again, customs vary widely, and information is the key to good team spirit.

There are well over a hundred different religions, many sects within each, and countless personal variations. Our experience has been that a general understanding of religions, and some simple questions about personal preferences, without prying, will demonstrate mutual consideration to the members of the team. This, in turn will help bond the members together by displaying common consideration, and thus nurturing it in the team members. If the project manager does not show consideration, the team members will not.

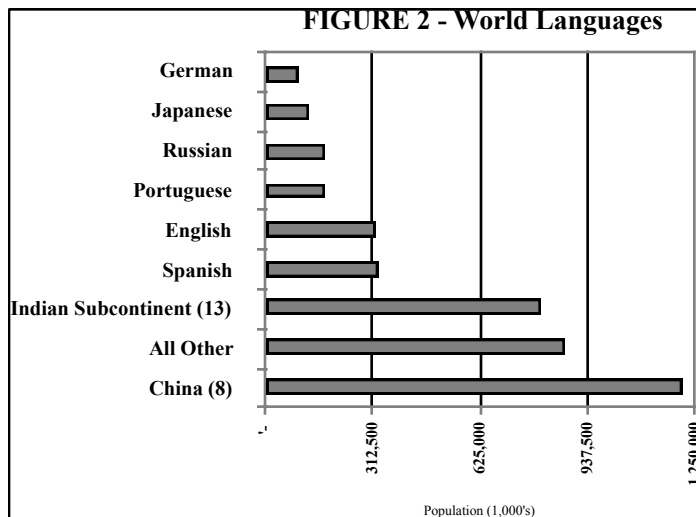
LANGUAGE

Global projects are conducted in multiple countries, but usually have English as the primary language or reference standard (like the US \$). However, each customer will communicate in their native tongue, and each firm or group will communicate most effectively in the predominate language of the country in which the team is located.

FIGURE 2 summarizes the major languages spoken around the world (3). It should be recognized however that there are hundreds of additional dialects and local intonations. There are 13 major languages in India alone, and in Indonesia there are thought to be well over a 100 individual languages spoken.

When we first traveled internationally in 1976, it was difficult to order water in Italy

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language that is their native tongue, and will utilize English when required. This has a natural tendency to polarize the team into groups, and countermeasures must be sought to pull these individuals back into the mainstream. The other natural tendency is to revert to the native language when complex ideas or theories must be communicated. Global firms struggle with this dilemma regularly. One example that highlights the problem is management training. Global firms seek to raise the standard of the nationals on the payroll by offering corporate training. By conducting the training in English, it forces individuals to learn to better communicate in that language: a benefit. At the same time it hinders a thorough understanding of the subject material itself for those who are not 100% fluent: a disadvantage. So, as would be expected, most firms do some of both to strike a balance.

Externally, the members of the customer or partners team will communicate in their native language as well. This places the internal project team at a disadvantage for a number of reasons. First, the external group can discuss the pros & cons of arguments without having to break from the meeting, and can critique on the spot. This requires that the internal team members must be extremely well prepared before entering a meeting. Second, it places those members of the internal team who speak English as a second or third language at a further disadvantage for they are at least two steps removed from a perfect understanding of what is being said. Third, it creates multiple opportunities for claiming misunderstandings from the external group.

Languages have different structures. In English the normal pattern is subject-verb-object, whereas in Japanese the pattern is subject-object-verb. Even for an individual who is fluent in both languages from birth, it is daunting to attempt to translate. The ideas may be easily understood in one language, but because of the differences in structure and vocabulary, translation can only be done on a limited basis. At a recent management training program in Tokyo there was simultaneous translation available. Each 10 minutes a new individual would take over to give the previous person a rest. It is demanding and fraught with possible miscommunications, so be considerate.

Translation even by fluent professionals is also not always a complete answer. On a project in the USA we were installing a German machine and ordered a translator from the United Nations: Helga was her name. She was exceptional with the languages but had almost no technical vocabulary. So we ended up drawing pictures and using common technical terms to communicate about work, and used Helga to translate personal ideas. On another project in Madrid, we hired a translator for a meeting with government officials. The official spoke a little English, but wanted to practice, and wanted us to respond in Spanish. We found ourselves completely lost for we were working in a language that none of us understood, especially the translator.

It is common to think that one can rely upon numbers to speak for themselves, and to be language independent. In Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Thailand for example the languages utilize different symbols for numbers. Western numbers are often used simultaneously (license plates for example), but the application is inconsistent. Also, different languages utilize different alphabets and symbols (Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, etc.). In Japan, for example, there are 3 different systems of characters utilized: *Kanji* (chinese ideograms), *hiragana* (used to link ideograms), and *katakana* (Japanese symbols). This creates concerns for the word processing needs in each country. Microsoft® products are now available in dual languages and alphabets, but there are still file transfer issues to confront.

Another fact that is sometimes overlooked is the use of different calendars. For example 1999 on the Gregorian calendar, is 1419/1422 in Saudi Arabia, and 2542 in Thailand. This difference must be considered when arranging formal communications, and when working with formal government documents. Therefore, one should acquire a local calendar.

Lastly the use, and understanding, of the concept of *yes* and *no* vary widely. *Yes* does not always mean agreement, but often is merely a confirmation that the other person wishes to be polite by recognizing that they have been spoken to. This is the case in Asia and in the Middle-East, where courtesy requires recognition. Likewise, *no* does not always mean rejection. In fact in Thai there is not a word for *no*; the Thai's use *mai kop* or not *yes*. The point is that the use of these simple English words can be totally different depending upon the country. Furthermore, the issue of *face* must be considered. *Face* (personal dignity or self respect) is a precious commodity in Asia and the middle-east, and most everywhere else to some degree. So to receive a polite *yes*, and later insist upon it having been it as acceptance, can cause everyone much embarrassment.

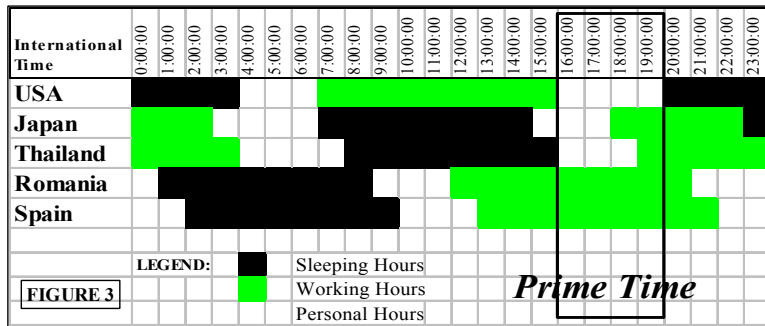
LOCATION

Global projects often have team members in multiple countries, with customers in totally different countries. Depending upon the level of development of the individual countries, the communication systems and support systems may vary widely. It is now not uncommon to have a project that is, literally, conducted on a 24-hour basis.

As mentioned in the opening, the world economy is changing and with it project management - case in point our staff in Thailand. Global companies are sowing the seeds for future change by increasing the number of 3rd country nationals used on projects. In Thailand we hired an Indian national, and used the project to train him in the corporate business culture and systems. In the next few years, I expect that he will be managing a project somewhere other than his native country, and he will confront the same problems as

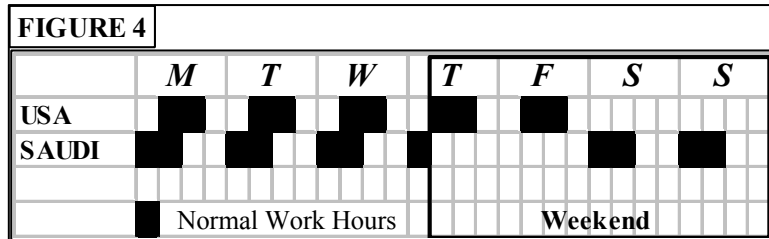
would any other expat. The difference being only the culture through which he views the client and the team.

Diverse geographical locations of project teams make communicating more challenging. On a recent project we had project management located in the USA (eastern time zone), design located in Romania, fabricators in Japan and Spain, and the project site in Thailand. FIGURE 3 shows the effect upon the project team’s work day. The *Prime Time* hours show the time during each calendar day when everyone is awake, and perhaps fully functioning.



The challenge is to find ways to communicate regularly, and effectively, with these differences in time zones. Longer work days are often used, but this leads to serious inefficiencies after a few months. It became normal on the example project to have conference calls that lasted for hours, and made the days in Thailand extremely long. Also, take care to use an international time format (24 hour clock) to avoid confusion.

In FIGURE 3 the *Normal Work Hours* bar for the USA is a different day that the bar for Thailand. This can cause a lot of confusion in communication itself. For example a simple statement like “we will get the report completed tomorrow” can mean two days later for the USA people if the Thailand team is doing the work.



Another area of challenge to communications is holidays and weekends. On a project in Saudi Arabia for example, Friday is the holy day, and the *weekend* often starts after the midday prayers on Thursday. With a team in the USA this

immediately reduces the work week to Monday through Thursday. When the 8 hour time difference is then introduced the work week is shortened by an additional day due to the time difference. FIGURE 4 shows this graphically.

On another recent project, the team was located in the USA, China, Pakistan, and the UK. On this project there were 9 separate holidays during the month of May. Given that there are 21 work days available, two are lost each week due to the Friday holy day (a total of 8 conservatively), this then leaves 6 days when the entire team is readily available.

Most International projects operate on a six-day workweek, and usually 10 hours+ per day. Thus, 312 work-days per year or 3120 hours are available at any given geographical location. However, using the concepts from FIGURE 4, a 3-1/2 day week would reduce the available work days to 182, and from FIGURE 3 the *Prime Time* hours (4 per day) for the entire team are reduced to only 728 hours. Of course, longer hours are an alternative, but there is a price to pay in terms of efficiency. There have been numerous articles and studies on the effect of extended work hours on productivity. A rule-of-thumb is that productivity drops to 50% after working on a schedule longer than 60 hours for more than 30 days. If you have

done it, and tried to manage it, you know this can be a very conservative estimate.

Thus if you reduce the Available Hours by 80% and the productivity to 50%, the real challenge for managing an international project is simply how to design a system which provides highly effective communications.

COMMUNICATIONS

Infrastructure varies widely from country to country. In 1998, unlike 1978, most countries have telephone systems that enable calls to be made internationally. There are still locations where this is not the case, and those projects will demand special treatment. On projects in undeveloped countries, or in remote areas of developing countries, voice communications are undependable. Primary considerations such as medical emergencies, insurgencies, or natural disasters demand that projects must have a lifeline to the outside world.

Regular communications are required on all projects, and the health and success of a project will be determined by the effectiveness of the communications. The major options that currently exist include express mail, fax, phone, video, travel, and e-mail. Express mail is now normally used for moving material (contracts, parts, etc.), and not for regular communications. The remaining options rely upon communications technology, and what is available from a budget and location perspective. Thus, it is vitally important to understand a bit about the mediums, and about the infrastructure in each country of the project.

The fax machine is the standard tool for communications as everyone knows. It has the benefit of being fast, visual, and recordable. When working with multiple locations, written communications are essential in avoiding misunderstandings. As an example, on communications with Japanese firms it is normal to have verbal understanding only to have it reversed the next day. A fax confirmation enables both parties to consider/translate the idea privately. We have found it to be an excellent way to demonstrate consideration for the team members who are not working in their native tongue.

Conference calls are a good way to get the team participation that is essential when conducting projects at multiple locations. It is not a substitute for face-to-face meetings, but in today's economy it is simply not possible to afford the luxury of team meetings requiring travel. A project with participants in four remote countries will lose a complete week to do a one or two day meeting, with a cost to the project of between \$2,000 to \$6,000 per person (unless the meeting is in Tokyo where the cost can be 3 times higher).

The conference call is the alternative that is used most often for the daily communication on a project. One simple challenge is to get conference calls established. Recently we received an e-mail that said: *We have set up a call for 11pm Sunday 4/11/99, to discuss open issues.* This was on a project in India with team members in Japan, and the e-mail originated in the USA. So, whose 11PM, and what Sunday? Another consideration for calls is how to link up numerous people in numerous locations with different levels of technology. One can use a conference center to overcome the difficulties, but the price must be considered when building the budget.

The video conference is a more interactive method of avoiding travel, but it is not widely available, and it is extremely expensive. On a previous project in Thailand we conducted

weekly video conferences with the team in Japan and the USA which would last from 2 to 4 hours. The first consideration (as shown in FIGURE 3) is the time zone issue. Conducting a video conference at 7:00 PM in the USA after a full day of work is inefficient, and the time delay on the screen is sometimes like watching a spaghetti western. There is more of a tendency to have side discussions in other languages in these forums, and it has been our experience that the visual image of another person does not enhance the communications and understanding significantly. However, it is a great benefit to be able to immediately transmit documents and drawings for discussion.

In our experience, the most effective daily method of communications is e-mail. If one can get a phone line, one can usually get connected. So if voice communications exist e-mail may be a real possibility for the project. Details on the actual implementation are beyond the scope of this paper, but we would like to offer some experiences.

We use e-mail extensively both for internal and external communications, worldwide. It is a terrific tool, and a great benefit to project communications. In Thailand we had a server on a project site and a dedicated line to Bangkok, and then beyond. This enabled us almost instantaneous access to drawings and other data, and enabled us to transmit digitized files over the network. This is a huge benefit on fast paced projects with technical and contractual complexity.

By contrast, in Saudi Arabia and Turkey the site connection to the internet was poor, and it only could support a 2800 baud rate. With a single phone line and multiple users, it was difficult to much more than send simple quick messages. The offices in Jeddah and Istanbul had better communications speed, but the lines were of poor quality again limiting the usefulness. In Riyadh we had good lines and good speed, but due to Saudi law we could not gain internet access due to concerns about pornography.

As with any other project document, there needs to be control over the distribution and filing of e-mail documents. E-mails are project records, and often replace fax and letters because of their speed and ease. I have sent an e-mail from Brunei in about 2 minutes, and the same information by fax required at least ½ hour, and a lot of frustration. It should also be noted that it is simple and easy to copy a sensitive document to the entire world by a quick press of the *send* button on a late night.

GUIDELINES

The international work place is diverse, and is changing rapidly. Project Managers must, and I reiterate must, take the time to think through the cultures, languages, locations, and communication systems for international projects. There is a wealth of information freely available, even if one does not work in a global firm.

Make a *Project Guidebook*, as a first order of business. The more you know, and the more consistently you can communicate this information to the rest of the team, the more effective your communications will be. The *Project Guidebook* should include the following information, and should be kept current, and should be issued to each team member:

A. BACKGROUND

1. Team Members - List them, their nationality, and a short bio.
2. Countries - A one page summary of geography and history where teams are located.
3. Religion & Customs - Readily available from the embassies, or travel literature. We also recommend a copy of *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands* by Terri Morrison, Wayne A. Conway, and George A. Borden. The travel literature will provide additional readings that may prove most useful. For example, the *Anatomy of Dependence* by Takeo Doi provides essential insights into Japanese thinking.
4. Languages - List the languages spoken, and some major considerations such as alphabet and numbers, and useful phrases like good morning, hello, thank you...
5. Holidays & Normal Business Hours - List them for each country, and briefly describe the holidays.
6. Emergency Numbers - May be obtained from the local US Embassies, or from business firms that specialize in providing international medical assistance.
7. Communication Technology - What is available in each country such as telephone, fax, e-mail, internet, satellite, etc.
8. Living - Basic information on food, hotels, apartments, airlines, trains, buses, etc.

B. PROJECT COMMUNICATIONS

1. Telephone Directory - Include individuals, their firms, and any external entities. Also include the Embassies and emergency numbers. Make sure to include home phone numbers, fax numbers, cell phone, e-mail, hotels, and anywhere else where people may be contacted off-hours.
2. Communication Matrix - Develop a separate matrix for documentation and e-mail.
3. Communication Map - Using the examples of FIGURE 3 & 6 construct a time zone map with the *Prime Time* shown.
4. Daily Communication Plan - Make a plan of how, when, and what type of daily communications must occur. List the time of day and the date in each country utilizing international formats. For example an entry would say Tokyo, 1300 hours, 21 August 2000, and would provide a conference call-in number.
5. Weekly Communication Plan - Same as daily, but when less frequent contact is required.
6. Meeting Plan - Establish tentative dates for meetings with location if possible.
7. Project Standards - State the project language(s) to be used for letters, reports, meetings, and conference calls: State the time and date formats to be used: State the protocol expected for external communications. Also, consider the continuing nuisance for records of 8 ½ x 11 paper in the USA, and A4 everywhere else (try buying an A4 binder in the USA sometime).
8. Confirmation Rule - ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS confirm what you have said in writing. My rule to communicate internationally is, say it three times and write it a fourth.

REFERENCES

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