



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

---

20 April 2002

### Managing a Dispersed Project Team

In the past, a project team almost always resided in one location. The reason is obvious. It was not easy to communicate and collaborate with people that were not in the same physical location. Today, it is still common for a project team to be in relative close proximity. However, it is also becoming more and more commonplace to have team members physically located all over. This may be because of pulling in resources from other company locations. In some cases, you may have team members that are teleworking from home. In other cases, you may be partnering with a third party partner - perhaps even internationally.

All of this is more common today because of advances in technology and software. People can access your company's computer network remotely with almost the same speed as if they were in the office. Software is available to share documents and make updates available real-time to the rest of the team. The team can get together as needed using phone conferencing. You can even see each other if you like using teleconferencing or utilizing video technology over the web.

That is all good news. The not so good news is that it is still easier to manage a team when the members are located together. There is no technology that can take the place of reaching out and touching someone, or talking to them face-to-face. So, from a project management standpoint, if you have team members that are working in different locations, you have some risk. If people are located in two buildings close together, the risk is low. If they are located in a different country, the risk is higher.

#### Identify Remote Team Members as a Risk

If you have a project team that is dispersed, you should identify it as a risk when the project is being defined. It is not an issue, since it is not causing a problem right now. However, there is some risk that this situation may cause a problem in the future. Then, put together a risk plan that will mitigate the situation and make sure that problems do not occur in the future. Consider the following ideas.

- **Make sure everyone has the same technology.** Make sure that your remote team members have the right equipment, hardware, and software to get their work done. If they are working from home, a 14.4 modem probably will not cut it. Everyone needs to have the same version of the standard word processing and spreadsheet software. Everyone needs the same development environment software.
- **Utilize collaborative technology.** There are many products on the market that allow for much easier collaboration for people who are in different locations. Much of this is web-based today. For instance, you can get software that allows everyone to participate in a common meeting on the web, including viewing and changing common documents. These virtual meetings include both talking and viewing at the same time. Another consideration to make is ensuring everyone has common access



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

---

to project files. This could be in a shared folder environment or utilizing a common repository tool.

- **Make sure people have the right attitude.** Both the Project Manager and team members must be especially diligent and sensitive to collaboration and teamwork concerns when part of the team is remote. It is easy for a remote worker to fall into a mode where he or she is isolated from what is going on with the rest of the team. People who are working remotely must be proactive communicators and must be especially good at working independently and meeting their deadlines. The rest of the team needs to look for opportunities to engage the remote workers in discussion and current status. If a person does not organize their time well, has poor follow-up skills, or has a tendency to miss commitments, he or she is probably not a good candidate to work remotely.
- **Establish good communication processes.** The Project Manager needs to develop a proactive Communication Plan to ensure the disperse team works well together. For instance, if possible, there should be regularly scheduled meetings where the remote workers attend in person. If the team members are in different cities or different countries, look for common times when you can have a videoconference or audioconference. If team members are located in the USA and Europe, these might need to be staged in the morning for the United States, which corresponds to the afternoon in Europe. If the time zones are too far apart, one of the parties might need to participate outside of normal working hours.
- **Plan the handoffs.** Sometimes multiple people in different locations are working on the same, or related, deliverables. In these cases, the Project Manager may need to establish rules for handoffs, especially if different time zones are involved. For instance, a team member in the US might work on a software component for eight hours, then leave a detailed explanation of status and issues for a second overseas team member that will continue the work at night (which would be their working hours). Don't leave the hand-offs to chance. Set up processes to ensure that work on shared deliverables transitions smoothly from one person (or team) to another person (or team).

### Summary

The bottom line is that the Project Managers must recognize that there is inherent risk associated with remote team members. To a certain degree, the risk gets larger the further away they are because you not only deal with distance, but also time differences. However, a proactive Project Manager can work through the difficulties by looking holistically at the people concerns, process concerns, and technology concerns. A risk plan can be set up to mitigate the risk and ensure that the dispersed team works well together for the common good of the project and the team.