Working Globally, Living Locally

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Abstract- **During the last decade we have experienced a period of rapid technological advancement. This period produced unprecedented progress in the way people communicate between distant parts of the globe. Today, your closest co-worker may only be about two tenths of a second away (measured by the speed of light), since the Internet enables us to participate on the same project, regardless of geographical location.**

While we can now put people from distant locations and very different cultures on the same project, managers have to enable them to work effectively by the implementation of the appropriate tools. Professionals have to be ready to contribute to their professional communities, both locally and globally. In addition, each professional must be in charge of his or her own growth plan.

This paper gives tips for managers and professionals on how to participate locally in the community, and tools they can use to work more effectively in a distributed team.

I. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade we have experienced a period of rapid technological advancement. This period produced unprecedented progress in the way people communicate across distant parts of the globe. The technological advancement resulted in new ways of working. At the same time, even as we work on a global scale, we intensely seek to live close to family and friends.

The new reality of our age is that we work in global teams. If you work in a large company, but even if you work in a small company, there is a good chance that you are already part of a global team. As we are becoming global team members, now, more than ever, we are seeking out communities to live in that resemble the communities of the last century. Many people live outside of large cities and have no desire to change that.

During the last century people moved to cities to be close to jobs. If they didn't or couldn't move to the city, then they had to commute long distances every day to reach their place of work. This is expected to change during this century.

II. TECHNOLOGY: ENABLES GLOBAL WORK AND BRINGS GROWTH TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The ubiquity and richness of telecommunications (data, audio, and video) make it possible for global teams to exist. The same force that enables people to participate in global teams also enables people to forgo their lengthy daily commutes. The high-speed telecommunications links allow people to work from their home offices, or local offices that are close to where they live. This is a significant change that will increase the quality of life factor for many people in this country. [1]

Imagine the possibilities: you don't have to commute for 45 to 90 minutes each way to your office! What could you do with that hour to hour and a half each day? You could live close to your family, friends, favorite outdoor activities, or simply in a place that you like.

What are some of the things that you could with 5 to 8 hours a week?

1. Sleep some more

2. Spend more time with the wife, kids, grandparents

3. Exercise or play sports (as opposed to just watch them)

4. Study and improve your productivity on the job

5. Work some more for extra income

6. Pick up a hobby and thus get some sanity for the rest of the week

The hidden secret of global teams is that as you and I are working on global teams we are learning how to effectively work on distributed teams. This is the skill that allows us to live away from the city center where the jobs traditionally are live in places that are less congested.

III. PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGERS OF DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

Here are two tips that you, the manager, can implement to foster your global team, both of them made possible by today's advanced technologies:

1. Implement online tools, other than email.

2. Arrange regular in-person team meetings.

A. Implement Online Tools, other than Email

Here are some online tools that distributed teams can benefit from are:

a. Wiki systems

b. Instant messengers

c. Video and Audio Skype

Wiki Systems Email is the most commonly used online communication and collaboration medium. Unfortunately, email has many shortcomings that make it suboptimal for effective use by distributed teams on distributed projects. One of the simplest online collaboration systems that enable you to share knowledge about the project across short and long distances is a Wiki.

A Wiki is an online collaboration system that allows user to add, edit, and delete content with or without registration. Open Wiki installations are sometimes subject to vandalism, however behind corporate firewalls, the Wiki can be used very effectively without such worry.

The open nature of the Wiki makes it very flexible. It can contain free-form text without any markup, or with a very minimal markup. To use a Wiki effectively on a project, you will need to define page templates and site structure that is conducive to the type of work that you and your team are doing.

Benefits of a Wiki:

1. All team members can contribute

2. A change made in Austin, TX, can be seen immediately in Mumbai, India. It can be the system of record for all documents that a project uses.

3. Pages and attachments are versioned, thus accidental deletions can be easily restored.

Common drawbacks of a Wiki:

1. Unrestricted access by all team members. Some Wiki systems allow you to restrict access on a page-by-page basis. Though, I would argue that universal access to each page is more of a benefit rather than a hindrance.

2. Free-form pages. With freedom comes responsibility, so the saying goes. To make effective use of the system, a project team must define templates and structure that will be used. Adherence to this structure is voluntary, since Wiki systems don't normally enforce the structure.

3. Limited markup. Microsoft Word allows wonderful editing capabilities in terms of choices of font sizes, font typefaces, and other text adornments, including tables. Most Wiki systems do not have these features; however there are some systems already that allow you to edit text in a WYSIWYG editor.

In balance, the benefits of a Wiki system outweigh the drawbacks, and most project teams will draw significant advantages from the shared context captured and built in such systems.

Instant Messengers. Instant messengers, as their name implies, provide for instant communication between two parties. But what makes them really interesting, is that they provide a sense of presence, where none exists. Through the software, each party can "see" if the other party is by their computer, provided they configure the software to do that. This feature allows a team of people to work as if they would be in close proximity. More on this topic under Video and Audio Skype.

The messaging software also allows the user to configure the software in a way to not interrupt the person doing the work. Then the messages are accumulated, and they only show up, when the user explicitly clicks on the instant messenger's window. In addition, the software can be configured to tell the rest of the team that I left my desk, or that I am out to lunch, much like I would say if I am working with them in the same office.

Video and Audio Skype. Skype, the free voice over IP software provider has been around for a few years now and they have progressively improved the capability of their software. As the internet infrastructure improved, the voice quality improved with it. Video features were added to Skype in January of this year.

A significant benefit of Skype both audio or video, is the fact that because it is free, you can keep it running and connected all day long. This means that with your remote team you can create the feeling that you all are in the same room, even though you might be many miles apart. Of course, this doesn't work well, if the rest of your team is in a time zone that is 10 hours from yours. However, it works real well, when the rest of your team happens to be in an office that is in the same time zone, or in one that is +/- 3 hours away. This allows the team to work in an unprecedented fashion. I have used Skype in this fashion before. As you work with your remote team-members it makes you feel like they are in the office next door, except you cannot see them. Video solves that, too.

B. Arrange Regular In-Person Team Meetings

Tom Peters in the Circle of Innovation [2] states that "The best complimentary tool to the Internet is the Boeing 747."

This is his way of saying that the online systems and connectivity are wonderful, but there is no replacement for personal bonding and personal relationships through in-person meetings. Relationships can be built faster and more effectively when people are in the same physical space and meet face-to-face, to get to know each other.

From my personal experience, it is critical to the well functioning of a distributed team to have the manager visit the remote location or locations. But the manager's visit alone is not enough. It is also important to have the team members know each other. Thus team members' visits, especially if they have different cultural backgrounds, will provide a unparalleled benefits.

Interestingly enough, these visits don't have to be too long, nor do they have to be very frequent. Week-long visits of once a year work fine to jumpstart and to maintain the relationships. Once the relationships are started, the technology can take over.

IV.   TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS WORKING ON DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

Working on a distributed team poses some unique and some typical challenges. Remote professionals can get disconnected from their peers and from their professions. This doesn't have to happen. Here are two tips to make ensure that you stay successful in your career:

1. Join Professional Networks, both Global & Local

2. Create Your Portable Career Plan

1. Join Professional Networks, both Global & Local

For professionals that are part of a remote team, it is still important to keep being connected to other folks in their profession. Technology enables you to connect with other people in your field either in person, or online. There are several societies that you can join, among them for computer professionals the IEEE Computer Society (IEEE CS), or the Association for Computer Machines (ACM).

A person working remotely still needs to have a network of people to meet with on a regular basis. Professional society chapters fulfill this need very successfully. Your local community has multiple professional society chapters that you can join and attend their regular meetings.

Several folks who join societies for their technical publications forget that attending the chapter meetings can be just as beneficial, if not more so. Today, professionals working in remote teams realize more than ever that they still crave the social aspects of their work that even the latest audio and video technologies cannot fulfill. This is where the chapter meeting comes in. You can meet with other folks in your area and build and enhance your professional network.

When you present at chapter meetings and share your knowledge, you are also growing the capabilities of your fellow professionals. A strong chapter attracts other like-minded folks, and soon the region becomes more attractive for new business to move into the area. Thus, you are able to hedge your bets: even though you can work very effectively remotely, but at the same time you are also able to build a strong local presence of professionals that is attractive for businesses to consider relocating into your area.

2. Create Your Portable Career Plan

So far we only achieved telephone number portability. We are still working to achieve health insurance portability. Your career plan doesn't have to be a casualty of the

congressional or corporate disagreements. Since you are in charge of this plan, you can create one that fits your needs and goals. Then, you can look for experiences that fit into your plan.

Many companies are attempting to assist employees with career plans, but the trend is not uniform. To achieve results favorable to you, take the matter in your own hands, and develop a career plan that you can take with you, regardless of where you work. In order to achieve "portability" focus on the following key concepts:

1. Decide what goals you want to achieve. Describe your goals in terms of experiences and not job titles. Job titles may change from company to company, but the experience you want might be obtainable in multiple locations and in multiple ways.

2. Decide on the role you will be playing in order to fulfill the goal that you want to achieve.

3. Decide what knowledge the role will require of you to obtain the specific experience.

4. Devise a plan to obtain the specific knowledge that you need. This may involve finding the right mentor.

5. Once you have acquired the bulk of the knowledge, you seek out experiences in which you can get into the role where you can achieve your goal.

Here is an example: you want to be leading a successful software team toward the release of the next software product. You identify that the role that you would have to fulfill is that of the technical team leader. Next you identify the knowledge required to successfully lead a team. Then you diligently work toward learning the needed knowledge. Lastly, you seek out experiences where you will be applying your knowledge.

CONCLUSION

There are still challenges ahead as we move further into the territory of distributed work. We have a few good tools due to the technological innovations of the last decade. However, our management practices haven't kept up with the changing times. Further innovations are needed in terms of organizing distributed teams, managing the work, challenging and motivating remote professionals.

The same technology that enables us to work on teams scattered around the globe, also can enable us to work with teams within the same city, but without the need to commute downtown 5 to 8 hours per week. The widespread use of "local distributed" teams will bring new economic benefits to the suburbs and small cities. A locally distributed team can come together to meet regularly (weekly) and enjoy many of the positives of co-located work, without the drawbacks of the daily long commutes. Technology that you implement today for global work makes local distributed work possible, too.

REFERENCES

[1] Pink, Daniel, H. *Free Agent Nation*. New York, NY: Warner Books, 2001.
[2] Peters, Thomas J. *The Circle of Innovation*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997.

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