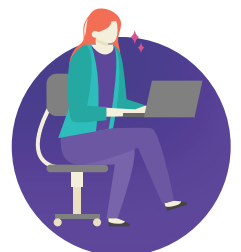# THE OBSTACLES OF RUNNING GEOGRAPHICALLY DISTRIBUTED IT TEAMS:

How to
overcome them?

What it means to operate an IT team has evolved in recent years. Today's teams are more efficient, flexible, and streamlined than the ones of the past, and much of this is because of a constant desire amongst people in business to enhance their capabilities, and to harness the power of the latest technologies. Earlier, it was a given that the key players in a team would have to operate together in one building, or in close proximity. But this way of doing business had its drawbacks, which became evident over the years. There wasn't room for personal flexibility for one. Also, sticking to this approach had a financial bearing as well. For e.g. lack of availability of certain skills meant having to pay a premium to get people to work from desired locations. Even worse, having to forgo work if the tactic did not work.

Over time, technology opened up possibilities to revolutionize the way teams could function, and IT industry was amongst the frontrunners to seize the opportunity. Nowadays, IT teams can not only work smarter but also efficiently inspite of being geographically distributed. From using video conferencing and Skype to deploying apps like Slack or GoToMeeting/GoToWebinar, teams can leverage technology to have virtual meetings anywhere - **which essentially means that the members can work from anywhere too!**

However, there are challenges of operating a geographically dispersed team. Let's examine what they are, the impact, and how seasoned business leaders overcome them and manage to get the most out of their teams.
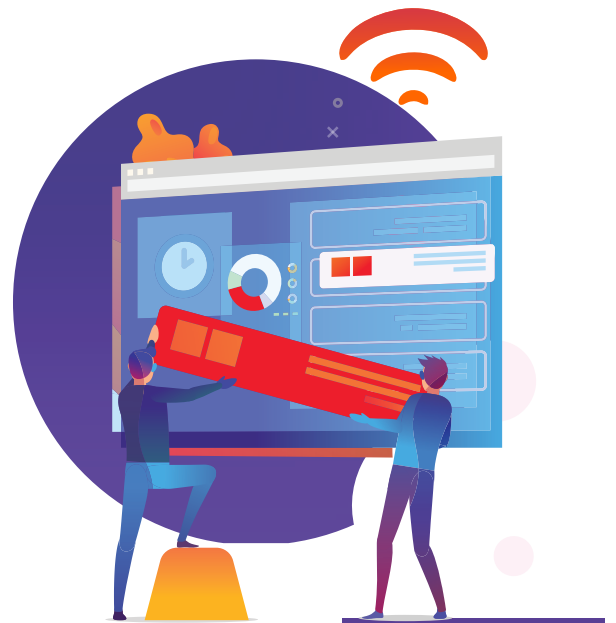
Why use geographically dispersed teams?

Bringing together a team of players from geographically diverse locations brings many benefits to the table. You gain a rich mix of ideas and cultural perspectives you otherwise would not from a team that is localized. Also, there is the opportunity to expand and tap into varied skill sets that would otherwise be lacking within certain geographies. For an organization, the approach breaks down the physical boundaries as far as the sourcing of talent is concerned. It has been noticed over time now that multinational corporations specifically have gained tremendously from having geographically dispersed IT teams.

Challenges when working with geographically dispersed teams

Ironically, the very characteristics that make a geographically dispersed team great are the same ones that prove to be its undoing. The very diversity that adds richness and culture to an organization also potentially raises possibilities to driving fissures. Here are a few of the challenges geographically dispersed teams face:

Perceived power imbalance

Group dynamics are an inherent part of all teams. Some people will rise to the head of the group just based on personality traits and some on expertise and knowledge. Usually, a team leader is expected to keep the power balance in check so that no one person dominates the ideas or flow of information. With a dispersed group, personalities may not play as much of a part as geographic location may. According to an article in HBR if more team members are consolidated in one location or they are in the locations that are geographically closer to that of the team leader, then there's a perception that these people have more power or access to power. This can lead to a feeling of isolation for the other team members or for that matter a feeling of complacency amongst the ones closer. Either way, it negatively affects the overall team morale.

Since it is not possible to change the geographic locations of members, team leaders can implement creative strategies to diffuse false perceptions. For e.g., a team leader may need to give particular "power" assignments to those who are farther away from the headquarters or who are working in smaller groups. In addition, having regular video chats or other types of communication with those that could potentially feel isolated will go a long way in ensuring that they stay connected and feel empowered.

Cultural insensitivity

Global teams will naturally contain people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Most people will not know everything there is to know about every other team member's culture. This can lead to some awkward situations, to say the least. It could even lead to some people responding in culturally insensitive ways. One wrongly spoken word could prove disastrous. Miscommunication, misunderstanding, and even hurt feelings can result. Team leaders can help curtail this type of problem by cultural sensitivity trainings. Most people in corporate setups are more than willing to understand other people and their cultures. Most problems are an issue of error, not malice, which means they can be easily remedied through training.

Lack of social connectedness

We are social beings and crave emotional bonds. Whether it's a family relationship or a working relationship, we like to feel connected to those with whom we associate. One element that enhances social connectedness is close proximity. This is evidenced in the workplace. Employees may chat during lunch, greet each other when they arrive at work, or say a few words to co-workers as they walk past their desk. These interactions cement the bonds. But globally dispersed teams do not have these opportunities. A vast distance separates natural opportunities for connecting, thus interfering with the all-important phenomenon of team bonding. However, it does not completely rule out the possibility of its occurrence. It just takes more effort and creative thinking to make these social connections happen. Team leaders can help foster relationships between members through virtual one-on-one or group time using apps like FaceTime or Skype. The leader can also encourage a greater connection for group meetings by allowing (and leading) some time for informal conversations. In addition, annual or bi-annual gatherings in person are wonderful opportunities for team members to forge bonds and cement the relationships which have been built via virtual channels.

Language barriers

Usually, the prominent language in IT global teams is English. However, this is unlikely to be the native tongue for many of the team members. Those whose native language is English are likely to have an advantage in meetings with their peers. This can present a problem for the others who are not as fluent. The less fluent speakers may feel shy about speaking up even if their ideas are good. If they do speak up, they may worry that others not quite understanding what they said or meant. This type of a situation makes it easy for the more fluent speakers to take control of things, push through their ideas and emphasize their opinions, which by all means is not an ideal for any team. Leaders can help overcome this impediment by setting forth guiding principles for discussions. An e.g. could be to suggest that the more fluent speakers slow down their speech and refrain from using difficult phrases. In addition, they mightlimit the amount of time they are given to talk and urge the less fluent speakers to speak more. The later ones need some assistance and leaders can help by summarizing their comments to ensure that everyone understood the information that as was intended.

Lack of proper technology

The technology for high level collaboration and remote communication is out there. It's just that many businesses do not deploy it correctly. For any organization, there has to be some research done to correctly identify the optimal technological solutions they need to operate efficiently. For example, virtual meeting platforms are ideal for bringing teams together for weekly huddles, or for quick incidental conferences. However, they may be found to be lacking in other areas. Similarly, instant messaging apps are great for keeping teams on the same page, but might fall short if they are relied on as the sole channel of remote communication. Deploying these solutions together skilfully navigates this issue.

Collaborative work needs to be supported with the right technology too. Cloud based document and file hosting gives remote teams a real time access point to documentation, ready for editing and for examination. Project management work flows similarly keep teams organized and operating in harmony. Now, there are many products available in the market for each type of function. Getting the right ones is the key and can make the difference between building synergy and causing disruption.

Lack of good leadership

Diversified teams must have exemplary leadership at the helm. Without it, the teams will quickly fall apart. Besides having the required technical expertise the person in charge of leading such teams must have a global mind set, possess high emotional intelligence, and know the art of mending fissures when they appear. The challenge of maintaining the right balance within the team, and having to do so from a distance is an uphill task. The ability to communicate skillfully isa priceless quality to have in the context. It has to be wielded effectively to defy and overcome the challenges that distance poses.

Conclusion

In a connected world, as businesses look to the future, geographically dispersed IT teams is a reality that has to be dealt with. For companies with a global outlook, not only is this approach a practical step forward but also one which can be harnessed to their advantage. The key is to recognize that the obstacles that exist are perpetual in nature and have to be dealt with on an ongoing basis.

Mindfire Solutions is a 19+ years old software development and services company. We have been the software development partner of choice of more than 1000+ companies in the SMB industry across the world. We understand the intricacies of delivering solutions with teams comprising of members dispersed across geographies.

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