

GOING GLOBAL

Managing a global workforce goes beyond purchasing some software. It requires collaboration, communication, and teamwork. BY MATT BOLCH



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uring a personal trip to Bulgaria, Jan Hargraves learned an important lesson that she can apply as director of global online learning at Fluor Corp.

“When people in Bulgaria say, ‘Yes,’ they shake their heads ‘No,’” Hargraves says. “I requested a wake-up call for 6 a.m. just for me. The clerk asked, ‘For all?’, and I shook my head in the Western tradition, indicating ‘No.’ I asked if the person understood and got what I thought was the appropriate response. However, everyone in my group got the same 6 a.m. call as I did.”

For U.S. companies, doing business in global locations can be a jarring experience akin to that too-early wake-up call. Dallas-based Fluor, a publicly owned engineering, procurement, construction, and maintenance services company, has 46,000 employees worldwide, including major offices in eight countries and operations in 50 international locations. The company effectively leverages a global workforce through consistent communications, relying heavily on technology to help workers train and communicate wherever they are.

"We collaborate among various offices all the time, and the direct reports of supervisors often are elsewhere," Hargraves says. "It's not a problem because of the Internet and technology. We collaborate and do the work where it is most efficient."

Fluor has adopted LotusNotes for its e-mail accounts, using its instant messaging feature and Sametime collaboration tool to communicate and conduct virtual meetings. The company uses SkillSoft for online learning, customizing courses in such areas as risk management, diversity/inclusion, and code of business conduct. Instead of a learning management system, Fluor has employed a talent management system from StepStone (formerly Executrack), using it as a global training tracking tool. The headquarters group also uses StepStone for succession planning.

Aperian Global's GlobeSmart cultural diversity training tool can help identify an employee's behavioral and interpersonal relationship gaps specific to a country or region, so training can occur before deployment. GlobeSmart also can be used to increase virtual team effectiveness by comparing an individual's profile to those of other team members.

But effective collaboration across geographies or managing global operations cannot occur by simply purchasing software. The company and its employees must address basic issues around interpersonal skills and working in a team, notes Tamara J. Erickson, president of the Concours Institute, the research and education arm of BSG Alliance. Erickson and Lynda Gratton, professor of management practice at London Business School, studied team behavior at 15 multinational countries, distilling their findings in a November 2007 article in *The Harvard Business Review*.

Today, many complex teams have 100 or more members and are separated geographically; however, the effectiveness of teams drops when the number passes 20 unless the right conditions are present for collaboration. "Even with a global team, don't forget face-to-face contact," Erickson says. "Get people together, allow them to get acquainted and form relationships. It's critical to the process of collaboration."

The value of training cannot be overlooked in team dynamics, whether employees are in the same location or halfway around the world. Skill sets around project management, conflict resolution, and handling difficult conversations are vital to the success of any collaboration. In studying the dynamics of successful teams, Erickson and Gratton uncovered four general categories: executive support, solid HR practices around collaboration, the strength of the team leader, and the structure of the team itself.

QUICK TIPS

WorkMatters Inc., a Birmingham, AL-based organizational development consulting firm, has worked with such clients as NASA, Microsoft Corp., and Lockheed Martin Corp. Firm President Gayle Lantz offers these tips for getting the best results out of global teams:

- **EMPHASIZE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION.** Sometimes leaders err on the side of over-communicating (e.g., copying everyone on the e-mail message). Think smart. Streamline communication efforts.
- **SEEK CRYSTAL CLARITY.** With a globally dispersed workforce, it's easy for members of a team to lack clarity about roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities. A manager can schedule one-on-one calls or small group calls on a regular basis for purposes of clarifying issues as you go along. It helps prevent unexpected fires.
- **PROTECT THE HUMAN ELEMENT.** With so much technology available to help a global workforce function, it's easy to lose sight of the human element. Schedule frequent in-person planning meetings, strategy sessions, or conferences to help build stronger internal relationships to help teams function at their best.

Teams that capitalize on pre-existing relationships have a greater chance of success, the authors note. "It's also important how a company defines the task. Many companies overdefine the work, which can take the creativity out," Erickson says.

Cultural differences aren't the only concern when trying to build a productive working relationship, says Christopher Musselwhite, president of Discovery Learning Inc., a Greensboro, NC-based company that provides assessment and simulation programs for individual, team, and organizational improvement.

He recently consulted with a man who left a large foundation in the North to become president of a community foundation in a small Southern town. "The man hit a brick wall within six months because of poor social skills," Musselwhite says. "It wasn't a cultural problem—it was his problem. When you're a stranger

in a strange land, it's your responsibility to adjust."

Any behavior can be misinterpreted in the wrong environment, Musselwhite adds. The key is to understand the culture in which a person or company is operating, be aware of the differences, and adjust accordingly. "The interpersonal side of global relationships cannot be overlooked," Musselwhite says. "Even someone who is a subject matter expert may not be the best person if he doesn't have the right skill set to deal with people."

Identifying deficiencies in skill sets, attitudes, and behaviors of employees is one of AchieveGlobal's offerings, but the company also practices what it preaches. The Tampa, FL-based company has 1,000 full-time equivalent employees and a presence in 44 countries. AchieveGlobal CEO Sharon Daniels says that over the last 4 or 5 years, more organizations are requesting help with multinational teams.

Within AchieveGlobal, Daniels says, effective communications are vital to maintain overall company culture and focus. She also stresses the importance of face-to-face communication whenever possible. "We spend a lot of money bringing operations managers together two to three times a year for a few days to talk about challenges," Daniels says. "We commit resources to put processes in place to make sure customer needs are met, and we actively solicit feedback from customers, staying close to them and making sure we're meeting their needs."

Despite operations in so many countries, Daniels says AchieveGlobal never has been forced to shut down operations in any country. "If we have issues, it's not because of the culture or the community," Daniels says. "It's been because of the manager there, and we can take care of those concerns." **T**