



Erran Carmel: Understanding foreign cultures is a key to making global software teams work

KATHERINE LAMBERT

Round-the-World Teamwork

Erran Carmel studied for three years how 17 major companies manage global software teams. The associate professor at American University in Washington has published his findings in a new book, **Global Software Teams: Collaborating Across Borders and Time Zones** (Prentice Hall PTR, Upper Saddle River, N.J.; 208 pages; \$39; paperback). Freelance writer Rochelle Garner spoke with him about his findings.

If you could single out one or two cultural differences that have the greatest impact on cross-national teams, which would they be? The first would be how each culture reveres hierarchy. In some cultures, people listen to superiors very care-

fully before they will express an opinion. Studies show that Russia, China and Indonesia have a high regard for hierarchy. Other cultures reverse equality. These include Israeli, German and American cultures. Those differences will manifest themselves in personal initiative.

Another key cultural element revolves around the notion of high-context vs. low-context communication. Low-context cultures [notably American, Northern European and Australian] use language very precisely. Language is the principal means of communication. This is in contrast to high-context cultures such as those found in Japan, China, Latin America and India. Here, the major component of communication is in the context: people's surroundings, past and present events and in the relationships between people. These cultures want to build a relationship first, and then they trust.

Can you give some examples of how cultural differences might manifest themselves in a development team?

All specifications have implicit mental and value assumptions that are understood by one culture, but not necessarily another. That becomes an issue when you hand off specifications to a culture that doesn't understand business, say, or the components of an advanced consumer culture. This applies particularly to India but also to Russia. That means everything has to be very carefully specced out.

How does a project manager cope with different time zones, languages and cultures?

The key lies in creating some methodologies and formalities for communication. There are certain protocols for how to write an e-mail that are critical when

dealing with people whose native language is not English. The first is to purge cultural idioms, like "apples to oranges," which others find hard to understand. Beyond that, managers should direct team members to acknowledge every e-mail within one workday and to avoid sending messages to multiple recipients unless it's absolutely necessary. E-mail headings should be descriptive, and the message body for administrative messages should follow agreed-upon templates. And e-mail senders should state explicitly the sort of response they expect.

It's important to remember that effective communication is through multiple channels, with a lot of redundancy. What was concluded with a phone conversation should be replicated in e-mail. And people should repeat back what they think they understand.

Your book addresses the vital importance of occasional face-to-face meetings - at project kickoff, at various milestones and to celebrate completions - with all team members. Is this something a company must budget if those cross-national teams are to work?

For a long-term project, periodic face-to-face meetings are recommended. Such get-togethers create relationships, relationships lead to trust, and trust leads to more effective teamwork. There's no getting around travel with a global team. Some people need to travel almost all the time. These include specialists and the project manager. But it also makes sense that some specialists be rotated to different sites for months, if not years, at a time.

You also write about virtual retreats as a way to build relationships across boundaries. Can you describe the practice and why it's valuable?

I would classify the virtual retreat as one of the many metaphors from the real world where people sit around a room and talk about themselves. This can be done with discussion groups and with chat rooms in teams that are in similar time zones. The point is not to talk about everyday problems with the project. Instead, they talk about their personal lives to establish [a] relationship, and they talk about the larger issues in the project.

Managers should encourage that participation, since it requires a lot of selling up front - with the manager contributing interesting and exciting posts that get others to join in.

What's the role of the cultural liaison?

It's a fuzzy role, but it's someone who acts as an important conduit of communication between the two most-prevalent cultures [on a team]. In India these days, that person is usually an Americanized Indian who had spent years in the U.S. and is sent back to manage a project. Many cultural liaisons are higher than the project managers.

Is there any piece of advice you would give companies about to launch global software teams?

Everyone on the project team dealing with anyone outside the immediate unit needs to understand something about that other culture. That's why I recommend that everyone receive some form of cultural preparedness training, taught by professional cultural trainers. ▀



Garner is a freelance writer in San Carlos, Calif. Contact her at rrgarner@pacbell.net.