

Telecoworking and You

by Stephen Turbek



RAZORFISH REPORTS

a publication of the razorfish science department | 11 december 2000 | report 042

It's 10PM in Stockholm, and Olle Stromdahl is in the office. It's not that this designer has a deadline to meet, or that he prefers working evenings. He's on a conference call with two other time zones – his coworkers are in New York City and his clients are in San Francisco. To him, it's just part of doing business. "Some days I don't come in until 1PM to make up for the time I have to stay at night, and then I lose touch with the people I actually sit near!"

The phone is just one of the tools we use to "telecowork": collaborating electronically with team members that are rarely seen. Unlike telecommuters, these people generally work in an office, located in another city, state, or country. Collaborating via telecommunications is fundamentally different from intra-office work and requires distinct considerations. Globalization and the Internet are making dispersed teams common, but careful coordination is required to prevent late nights and failed projects.

Human Sociology

Being social creatures, there is always a subtext to our interactions. A friendly chat predisposes us, however slightly, toward helping the other person later, a key factor in teamwork. Despite the stereotype of the lonely Web surfer,

people communicate more often when using digital channels than ever before.

Before the phone, communication was slow and mostly local. Proximity allowed people to gain tacit knowledge, the little bits of information that give the main points context. The speed that modern business expects has stressed aspects of our civil society, limiting the transfer of tacit knowledge. A recurring example is how poorly sarcasm travels via email. The lack of context and inflection make it all too easy to misinterpret a careless phrase.

Why Do We Telecowork?

As companies try to be more efficient and more effective, they demand skilled people to be in multiple places at once. Because global companies work with partners in distant areas, getting everyone together for a face-to-face meeting has become difficult to arrange.

For many years, companies have flown their employees to the most relevant office, but this is expensive and wears out the employees. Taking a cue from electronic communication, coworkers are encouraged to work from their local offices and communicate by email and phone. Although the initial meetings are done in person, the bulk of the communication will be done electronically to save costs.

The Benefits of Telecoworking

Telecoworking allows people to have more control over their lives during the working hours. People spend less time travelling and more time working. They don't have to fly back home to pick their kids up after school. "People can stay focused on their immediate tasks when they can manage their own schedule," says David Boyer, a writer in New York.

Telecoworking Limits Informality

Informal chats are much harder to have when people can't read facial expressions or other contextual information. "In my office, I can ask an informal question", says David Boyer, "but when working with someone located far away it is more difficult to understand what they are thinking. They may not feel comfortable talking about some issues over the phone." Accountability becomes harder to enforce when a project team is not together for encouragement and discipline.

How to Telecowork Well

Telecoworking can be successful if teams follow a few guidelines. First, recognize that telecoworking requires more effort than working locally. Teams need to build a dependable feedback system for distant team members or their input will be left out. Team members are responsible for keeping each other updated, in an regular series of progress releases. Relevant individuals should be asked to comment, but they must take the initiative to identify how progress affects them. Their input can be added in the next release.

Meet physically when you begin.

Telecoworking is most effective if the team has spent some time physically together at the beginning of the project. This puts a human face to each of the roles and helps to give some context to what people say. People who get to know each other are more likely to do a little extra work to help out. The Japanese habit of drinking with coworkers helps form comradeship and tight knit teams.

Be clear.

In close teams little assumptions constantly get corrected, leading to good



Stephen Turbek (stephen@razorfish.com) is in the razorfish science department.

'group understanding'. Distant team members are in a similar position to clients – they don't hear the programmer joking about the incompetence of the vendor, and miss the implicit valuation of the vendor's capabilities. If a team member has a different understanding of an issue, casually let them know what you were thinking, and let them realize

be used for discussion. Dial in to conference calls on time – it's worse than being late to a physical meeting. When on the call, stay focused –if you are reading or surfing, you can't contribute. If the call gets boring, try to wrap it up –perhaps everyone is done. Make sure that discussion notes are taken and distributed.

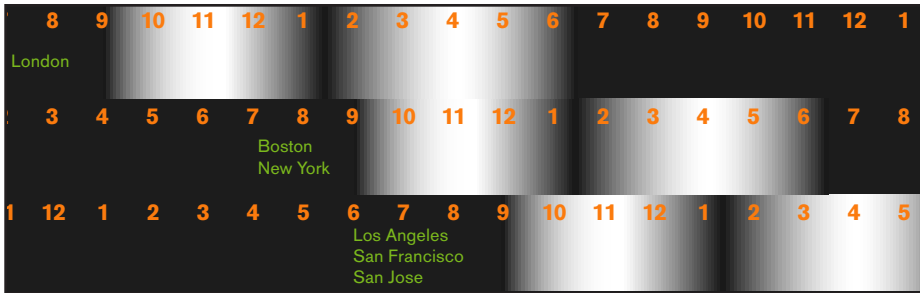


Chart showing work schedule overlap

(detail from razorfish global schedule poster listed in references)

the difference. Assuming it will work itself out almost always makes more work for you later.

Know which way to communicate. Make the medium fit the message. Use email to exchange large chunks of information, but use the phone to maintain a sense of how your coworkers are doing. Using Instant Messaging software to get quick answers has been the biggest recent innovation in communications. When sending emails, send a complete response to a question, including their message and the context. This also makes it understandable when you search through it later. Give new technologies such as video conferencing and Web meetings a fair trial. If they don't work for your team, drop them. Have scheduled phone calls, and get in the habit of talking to each other. Follow some level of formality when communicating, use the rules of netiquette. Discuss sensitive topics verbally as strong emotions can hit hard over email.

Use talk time effectively.

Conference call time is precious, update the people beforehand so the time can

Be aware of time zones.

Always specify in **which** time zone a 9:00 AM conference call is scheduled.

Working across time zones can effect workflow, due to the non-synchronized daily schedules, shown in the diagram above. If two people in Hamburg and Boston are taking turns revising a document, assuming an hour per revision, this results in four iterations vs. eight if both are in the same time zone.

Even though California is three time zones off of New York, the overlap of times means that there are really only two hours during the day that people are very likely at their desk (not at lunch, etc.). London is five hours earlier than New York, but the placement of the hours means that there are four contiguous hours of overlap. This can make it easier for a New Yorker to work with a Londoner, than with a Californian.

Do not force teams to work in synchronicity across time zones. Work in eastern time zones can be done before the westerners arrive, who can continue after the easterners have left, if properly planned.

Keep everyone's schedules updated.

Scheduling confusion is the biggest cause of telecoworking problems, but a little preparation can help. If someone goes away on vacation, make sure their files are accessible. Know what other projects your colleagues are working on. When there is transparency in the team, telecoworking stress can be reduced to a minimum.

Take extra care with outsiders.

Extra care must be taken when working with outside contractors, consultants, or clients. One must be particularly clear and consistent as they do not speak the same lingo and probably have other projects. Give them deadlines, but treat them as team members and they will act as such.

The author thanks Liz Danzico, David Friedman, Craig Kanarick, Shel Kimen, Ben Kleinman, JP Maheu, Karen McGrane, and Cindy Pound for their input, given electronically, of course.

for more information

Razorfish global schedule poster
<http://reports.razorfish.com/reports/timezones.pdf>

Discussion of coworking
<http://news.cnet.com/news/0-1007-200-3703118.html?tag=st.ne.1002.tgif.ni>

Research on virtual teams
<http://www.virtualteams.com>

Example of groupware
<http://www.technography.com>

razorfish reports are published regularly by the razorfish science department for our colleagues and the interested public.