

Global business teams need time to talk, not just e-mail

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Globally distributed teams cannot rely entirely on technology to overcome time and space barriers; they still need to talk. And that probably means working some overlapping hours, says a Duke University management professor.

Jonathon Cummings, associate professor of [management](#) and director of the Center for IT & Media in Duke's Fuqua School of Business, developed these recommendations based on a multi-year study of 108 project teams at Intel. Along with J. Alberto Espinosa of American University and Cynthia Pickering of Intel, Cummings assessed the effectiveness of various technologies in helping Intel teams overcome the challenges of different time zones and locations.

"Although technology can tremendously improve productivity, the Intel experience demonstrates that live communication made possible by overlapping [work hours](#) is still critical for a distributed team's success," Cummings said.

The 675 Intel employees included in the study worked in 53 locations in 22 countries. They completed an online survey about their project teams, reporting how closely they worked with each team member, the frequency with which they communicated with team members using different technologies (including email, telephone, instant messaging and web conferencing), and the extent to which their work suffered from "coordination delay," or time lost while waiting for responses or information from another group member.

Teams whose work hours did not overlap at all experienced the most coordination delay, despite the use of email and other technologies that do not require live communication.

"While it may seem that email is a great way to keep projects moving around the clock, none of the current communications technologies was effective in preventing delays when teammates did not share overlapping work hours," Cummings said.

"The engineers need to work together to talk through problems," one Intel employee explained. "So, when there are significant time differences, they just can't make good solid progress without being able to talk."

"This is not to say that technologies aren't important to corporate productivity," another engineer said. "Email and other tools were helpful in reducing delay for teams with overlapping work hours, but not having shared work hours proves to be a significant challenge to teams' efficiency."

Cummings, Espinosa and Pickering recommend that managers take steps to reduce the impact of non-overlapping work hours on teams. One way to do this is by shifting schedules so team members in one or both locations work non-standard hours, allowing them one or two hours of overlap with other team members. Another approach is to divide project duties between team locations so that tasks requiring frequent interaction are handled by team members with overlapping hours.

"Modern technologies have made so many forms of collaboration possible, it's sometimes easy for companies to forget how important direct communication can be to accomplishing a goal," another study participant said.

More information: The team's work appears in the peer-reviewed journal *Information Systems Research*.

[isr.journal.informs.org/cgi/reprint/20/3/420]

Provided by Duke University

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