Workshop Notes

Working in Globally Dispersed Teams – 15th May 2015

Background to Workshop

A workshop was organised to identify experiences with working in globally dispersed teams, whether through collaboration with 3rd party organisations; customers or through management of a remote team.

The workshop centred around 4 topics:

- Communication
- Technology
- Cultural differences
- Job Market and Workforce Mobility

Findings

The following experiences were identified:

Communications and Cultural Differences

- Challenges experienced through understanding and being able to hear what people are saying, whether it be because of differing accents or bad technology. This is not helped by not being able to see who you are talking too much of the time.
- There is often difficulty in understanding complex technical information, in particular.
- It was recognised that it is particularly difficult to build effective relationships when it has not been possible to meet a contact face to face.
- Cultural differences are not always fully understood, which can lead to a breakdown in communication.
- Holidays are different, throughout different parts of the world and combined with differing time zones it is not always easy to know when it will be possible to contact people.
- It was acknowledged that communication problems are not confined to working within different areas around the globe but can also affect those working in different cities in the same country or even working with teams in different buildings.

Technology and Job Market Forces

- Some teams will be using different tools for the same purpose across areas which can cause additional problems with communication and disjointed working practices.
- Sometimes it is tempting to over use email when there is a distance involved – or even if there is not.
- It is easy to forget economic climates may be very different in different parts of the world and when recruiting it is important to consider different inflation costs and mobility of the job market.
- It can be difficult to keep information secure when communicating over a distance, so it is important to select the communication tool which reflects the sensitivity of what is being communicated.

Ideas for overcoming issues

Communications

- Speaking clearly and avoiding colloquialisms helps others to get a better understanding of the conversation where there are language differences.
- Identify a common language for technical terminology, although this could apply across the board, the challenges are greater when a common language is not spoken as a first language.
- Travel should be used in order to build effective relationships, although it was acknowledged that the cost was a barrier at times. It was suggested that it is important to meet colleagues face-to-face in order to build rapport and conduct some team building activities. This was felt to be especially important when building new relationships.
- Introduce some informal discussions in order to build rapport and break down barriers.
- Appreciate time zone differences when booking meetings. Related to this, think about how people might be feeling based on the time of the day. Someone's start of day when they may have more energy could be someone's end of day when they might be flagging.
- Set some focus on soft skills and improving these, rather than always concentrating on formal skills and qualifications.

Cultural Differences
- Allowing remote parts of the team to 'brand' their own environment was felt to be important so that they don't feel that decisions and working practises are imposed on them by another part of the business.
- Some organisations conduct cultural training or recognition awareness in order to support employees with remote working practices and understanding different cultures. Understanding the cultural calendar and important holidays and festivals was felt to be important.
- Recognise cultural differences in the way teams see themselves and what is important to them. Some cultures set more importance on job title and reporting line and need very clear objectives and development plan to motivate them. It is helpful to give specific progression steps and clear role profiles.

Technology

- Try to enforce the use of common tools to increase collaboration and good working practices. It is important to have a strategy behind the rollout of a communication tool, so that it is clear how it should be used and by whom. Stick to mandated tools to ensure their effectiveness.
- Communication does not always need to involve formal meetings and email and it is good to consider some alternative means of communication:
  - Phone/Skype;
  - chat windows (these are particularly good for brainstorming and voting to get consensus on some topics);
  - wikis;
  - Jabber;
  - Yammer;
  - Google Hangouts;

- Stormboard Post-It tools (good for brainstorming, particularly in an agile working environment);
- Slack (good for team working and 1-2-1s);
- Webex and screen sharing;
- Trello agile board;

Job Market and Workforce Mobility

- It is important to understand a bit about the economic forces in different location and the political climate.
- Workers Councils can help with job market challenges.