

# Managers must 'fly by phone'

WHEN someone is 3,000 miles away, how do you tell him his work is not up to scratch? By letter? Fax? E-mail? Not if you want to offer guidance to help him improve his performance; not if you want to retain his respect and your authority.

This kind of problem confronts many managers as the growth of global organisations and advances in information technology make it necessary to co-ordinate activities over much greater distances. The answer lies in making better use of information technology.

Kevan Hall, a training specialist in remote management, says new skills are needed by people who work in, or manage, teams whose members are separated by distance, time zones and culture.

"Such teams present new problems of building relationships, exercising control through autonomy and developing the techniques of deriving global solutions from local problems," says Hall. "These issues are not addressed by traditional management training, which tends to emphasise face-to-face techniques. Most international managers travel extensively and often needlessly, at great personal cost, trying to apply traditional techniques, instead of adapting their managerial skills to the new environment," he says.

Hall, managing director of the Centre for International Business Studies UK, based at Wokingham, Berkshire, says many of the managers he trains spend up to 60 hours a month,

As business teams operate over ever larger distances, face-to-face meetings become inefficient, writes Margaret Coles

outside their normal working hours, travelling to meetings.

"In the UK we still have a culture of doing everything at meetings, and they're very time-consuming. The most regular international travellers become isolated individuals with little family life and no connection with the community beyond the company. Their professional effectiveness suffers as they miss the key perspectives and sense of balance that come from having a real life."

Therefore, says Hall, managers should think twice before booking the flight to New York. "A bad reason is to go to regular review meetings, where all you do is compare progress against deadlines; you can use technology for that. A good reason may be to form a relationship with a local colleague," he says.

"If you're doing an appraisal interview, I would say it must be done face to face — that's critical to motivation and development. If you're just giving regular information or clarifying objectives, why not do it through e-mail?"

"When meetings are necessary, time can be saved if they're organised round flights, or started mid-morning, so that people don't have to arrive the evening before and can do it all in one day. This is the kind of thinking that's needed; it's all about finding ways to explore this new environment."

Hall developed his ideas from his experience of managing a team based in Strasbourg, while director of training and education for Mars in Europe.

"Managers operating from a distance should establish smaller teams than they would have at head office," says Hall. "Ideally, they should have between six and 12 members — so that it is possible to interact with each person — and should reflect the diversity of their environment."

"During the early stages of forming the team, you need to invest a lot of time in getting people together, so they can develop relationships — because those relationships will be put under strain when communicating from a distance."

Hall says that organisations are failing to use information technology to their best advantage. "There's a vast range of low-cost equipment that can create connections between team members, to save every decision being channelled through the manager at the centre — but it's very underused."

"Managers need to develop a style of coaching that works over the phone if they're to exercise control effectively. You can learn to be a facilitator, guiding your colleague through



Kevan Hall: 'Most international managers travel needlessly'

a process of clarifying goals, offering insights and support, but making sure the responsibility stays with him or her."

Managers must become adept at capitalising on the learning opportunities within the group, says Hall. "There's still an assumption that learning gets done at the centre, but in fact most of it is done at the margins. The manager should be gleaned from each of the rich local environments and passing on what works to other parts of the organisation."

"You often see global policies imposed, even when they don't fit local conditions. When that happens, people will pretend to comply, but ignore the policies — which in turn become increasingly out of touch with local realities."

Hall has recently completed a training programme in remote management with Motorola, and is about to begin one with Hewlett Packard.

"My training concentrates on building teams in this environment, where you take people through the process of creating a community, identifying what they will share and where they will differ, setting up patterns of connections, and then letting them try it out for themselves in a remote environment."

"I think people are struggling with the new environment and finding their own solutions. We provide a framework to help accelerate that learning."

● *The Centre for International Business Studies is on 01734 795552; fax 01734 795553*