



Their empires may be expanding geographically, but today's managers are increasingly staying put. As the general cultural shift towards viewing Europe as a single entity continues to cross over into business, and as growing concerns over the economy force companies to integrate the business in an effort to cut costs, managers are leading teams that span ever greater distances and nationalities.

Remote team management may be a sign of the times, but so too are cut-backs in business travel due to the threat of terrorism and lean economic times. As recent as a decade ago – when remote teams were emerging as a result of companies taking on an increasingly global focus – the approach was very different.

SUPERMAN

“We call it the superman pants syndrome,” says Kevan Hall, president of Global Integration, a consultancy that trains people to work internationally. “Go in your office, spin round three times, pull superman pants over your trousers and start flying around. Because people have been so used to a hands-on style of management, they assume this is the only way to manage staff based in another country.”

Rick Woodward, training and

DISTANCE NO OBJECT

More companies are going remote in managing their teams. Margaret Kubicek looks at the people development challenges they face along the way

development director for Kimberly-Clark Europe, says frequent travel can inspire a false sense of security. “The belief was the more managers were kept on the move, the closer they were to the business. The reality was, although they felt close to the business, they were only visiting places about every two months.”

For managers to succeed in this new remote environment, says Woodward, they simply need to accept they are remote and use all that today's technology advances can offer to build community and manage activity

according to changing circumstances.

Virtual teams – led by a remote manager who has responsibility for an aspect of work or a short-term project but no line management responsibility for those on the team – are also making more of an appearance in today's global market.

Kimberly-Clark launched a global training programme and published an internal guide for its remote and virtual managers last year. It is expanding the programme this year and will include some tailored programmes for individual teams (see

CASE STUDY

**INFORMATION
FLOW FEEDS
GROWTH**

Two years ago Kimberly-Clark launched its global Going for Growth programme – restructuring its sales force to be customer-facing rather than regionally orientated following the growth of international retailers.

“We now have multi-functional sales teams and along with that restructuring, it made sense to develop European-wide systems,” says Chris Jefferies, Kimberly-Clark’s European business systems manager.

He was one of a number of Kimberly-Clark remote and virtual managers to take part in training facilitated by consultancy Global Integration last year. Jefferies now leads a team of 22 co-ordinators – formally put in place at the beginning of the year – across Central, Southern and Eastern Europe who support the new centralised sales and support system. Jefferies says: “The main challenge is to get the system understood and embraced and overcome the mentality which questions why we should adopt a new

European system when the local ones were thought to be working fine.”

He has planned a kick-off meeting for early March to bring everyone together in one place to share experiences, introduce them to the new role and understand their responsibilities. It will also include a module on remote working facilitated by Global Integration.

Establishing a good information flow early on is critical, as is getting the team to sign on to a shared – European – objective, says Jefferies. “Working remotely makes it easier for people to go off on tangents and do what they think is right and what might be best locally, but won’t necessarily be best from a European and a system point of view. People need to feel empowered to give input into the European system so they don’t go off and adapt the system locally.”

‘The main challenge is to overcome the mentality which questions why we should adopt a new European system when the local ones were thought to be working fine’



case study above). “From a systems co-ordinator point of view, we always did work remotely – we just didn’t do it as effectively as we could,” says Chris Jefferies, Kimberly-Clark’s European business systems manager. “Now, by understanding the challenges and adapting to remote working, we are.”

CHALLENGES

Most of us are used to a sense of team community occurring naturally, but this informal networking so natural in a traditional office environment just doesn’t happen across great distances, says Woodward. “You’ have to work at community and so you need a system to achieve it.”

For the remote or virtual manager, that means having a keen awareness of how, and in which circumstances, to use the different modes of communication – from old-fashioned phone calls or teleconferences to real time online discussion forums or e-mails.

E-mail, for example, is perfect for agendas and action plans. Says Woodward: “What frustrates me in meetings or video conferences is managers discussing action plans or timetables.

If time is precious you really want to use it for value-added activities and not clutter it with things that could be sorted out via e-mail.”

Woodward proposes that face-to-face meetings be reserved for discussing issues that are contextual, strategic or developmental – in short, those requiring debate.

In circumstances where the only contact is e-mail, responsiveness is key, according to Hall, who says something as simple as having access to a photo of someone can help build trust. Hall identifies building community as the first ‘dilemma’ facing remote managers. “When you look at what people remember of great teams it’s about community rather than ‘what we did’,” he says. “If you lose community in a remote team, you’re dead.”

Other dilemmas centre on how to manage activity without being face-to-face with your team and to what extent team members should look for common approaches as opposed to doing simply whatever works locally.

According to Dr John Symons, lead tutor in leadership at Henley Management College, emotional intelli-

gence behaviours such as listening, patience and sensitivity tend to make for more effective virtual and remote managers. These teams, by their nature, invite a less dominant, more consensual style of management, he says. “It’s something to do with the media, with allowing everyone to have a say and to be reflective.”

“We’ve all come out of meetings and said to ourselves, ‘I wish I didn’t say that’ or ‘I could have been punchier’,” continues Symons. But in the virtual environment, ‘even though the chairman of the meeting doesn’t catch your eye, you still get your say.’

MORE EFFICIENT

Symons maintains that hierarchies fade online and virtual working encourages an environment free from race, age and gender discrimination. In many cases, it can even be more efficient than the traditional office. Says Symons: “Remote communications such as e-mail allow people to be reflective, whereas face-to-face has more of a sense of urgency.”

The remote environment may delay the process of decision-making,



Getting away from the ‘superman pants’ syndrome: managers don’t need to fly around the world to manage their remote staff



CASE STUDY

GOING VIRTUAL FOR THE SHORT TERM

Bayer Pharmaceuticals uses remote team working for short-term projects to develop product education materials and sales excellence initiatives. The teams exist for up to 10 months and typically comprise seven or eight people across a range of Bayer's departments, such as product experts or medical specialists, and in different parts of the world.

Time and cost savings are a must, but Bayer accepts at least some face-to-face meeting is necessary, according to Claire Hutchins, a Bayer training manager. "These are not classic teams working over the long term," says Hutchins. "But people still need to form as a team and some face-to-face is needed if that is going to be achieved. Lack of face-to-face meetings means certain assumptions can take place about what people are doing and how much they are contributing."

Bayer employees may be working on a number of these kinds of projects at any one time, on top of their everyday role. "The challenge for anyone co-ordinating a team is to manage people without having direct line management responsibility for them," says Hutchins.

Ever present is the 'what's-in-it-for-me factor', she says, and it's best not avoided if the virtual team culture is to be fostered. Involvement has a number of benefits – not least early knowledge of new products the company is bringing to the market. "It broadens their minds to be globally rather than locally focused, and it also forces them to network more. It increases their visibility in the organisation as well as enhancing team working."

according to Symons, but it 'teases out richer debate' along the way.

For an example of the potential offered by remote team working, consider the recent launch of Vodafone live! in 15 countries on the same day. The company's latest consumer offering, Vodafone live! combines colour, sound and pictures to increase the range of mobile services on offer to customers.

The code for the software system which runs Vodafone live! comes from Japan, while other aspects of the product were developed in other countries. "You wouldn't get the scale in just one country to develop a product such as Vodafone live!," says Nick Holley, Vodafone's group director of leadership development.

"Remote team working allows us to develop ideas across the business and pool expertise rather than make it all come into the centre. It's about getting the benefits of being a global business while still building on local creativity and local understanding."

He continues: "This is about getting people to develop the same products in different countries. It's about co-creating things so we get ownership of

them as 'ours' not 'mine'."

Effective remote and virtual managers are those who delegate wherever possible and empower their team members. They also inspire a high element of trust, says Jeremy Webster, a partner at training and skills development consultancy MaST.

TOP TIPS ON INTEGRATED LEARNING

Once your remote team is in place and operating effectively, the final challenge is to get the learning and best practice that is taking place in different locations integrated across the whole team for everybody's benefit. Some practical ways to achieve this are:

- Train new team members specifically in how to work remotely. Allocate them an experienced mentor
- Get new team members to capture their learning, and then pass it on to the next new person. This makes a good induction project for new people, but do get experienced people to quality check the material
- Allocate specific time for learning during face-to-face meetings. Whenever possible – even if just once a year – get together in one place and devote time to celebration, recognition and learning

Source: Kimberly-Clark's guide to Remote & Virtual Teams

Webster identifies four elements necessary for managers to build trust: openness about what is expected of your people; reliability so that you don't make promises you can't keep or make unreasonable demands of your people; congruency in your actions so you don't say one thing and do another; and acceptance of your people and their strengths.

As with trust, many of the necessary ingredients to successful remote team management apply to teams in a conventional environment as well. Says Hall: "It's just that when we're face-to-face we can get by without giving attention to it."

For Webster, it's simple. "The remote teams that succeed are the ones that know what they have to do, what they can do, and deliver according to those strengths. And achievement is seen as common to all."

MORE INFORMATION

Global Integration is offering a free practical guide to the key challenges of managing remote and virtual teams to the first 25 readers who e-mail booklet@global-integration.com