

Technologies have their limits

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If any business centre has experienced both the benefits and drawbacks of geographically dispersed teams, it is the great world crossroads of Dubai. Here the enormous possibilities and the huge pitfalls of remote trading can be observed most closely.

Every new technological advance prompts us to abandon the physical office in favour of the virtual one. The intranet replaces the boardroom. Video-conferences are the new interviews. That young person with the BlackBerry strolling along the seafront at Shanghai could conceivably comprise the whole of our Chinese operation. A hundred tiresome chores have been abolished at a stroke of the pen. We feel weightless in space. The temptation to abandon the classic work environment can be overwhelming indeed.

But we also have to weigh what is lost in human terms, and these are the number of everyday personal interventions that we take as normal in the traditional team. The useful little cautions that slowly turn the clumsy beginner into a smooth professional. Those face-to-face confrontations with supervisors, who must, on occasion, assert their physical presence. The gradual awareness that a colleague looks as though they may be suffering illness, addiction or perhaps domestic problems at home.

If these usual checks and balances are being lost, then it follows that a new virtual team must compensate by being able to work effectively without them. And that means selecting individuals of exceptional calibre who are able to work without supervision - responsible, entrepreneurial, perhaps multi-lingual - as well as having the right mentality for long-range teamwork.

Even so, we must not ignore the issue of 'cultural transplant'.

My first important international client was a British paper manufacturer, noted for excellent employee welfare policies and good human relations generally. But even this company experienced unforeseen problems by the cross-cultural dimension.

The long-serving head of their Turkish office was seen as too slow to computerise his operation, so they replaced him with a more hi-tech MD. But the Turkish client had come to regard his predecessor as 'family'. Apparently the new man should properly have been introduced into the local business community in stages.

We could even see the collapse of Barings Bank as a case of an over-dispersed team. The London office noticed one bright young futures trader sending in extraordinarily good figures from a small branch on the other side of the world. They were so pleased they did not bother to carry out the required audit of his activities, but merely accepted them and took the profits. The inquest that followed this banking failure revealed that it was the distance from head office that had encouraged those fatally lazy reactions.

Key points: Dispersed teams

- Technology makes long-range dispersal highly tempting.
- Employees must be able to cope well with reduced supervision.
- Cultural compatibility is not automatic in remote destinations.
- Distances could cause improper reading of situations.