

Creating Effective Global Legal Teams

Logistical & Cultural Considerations



Cisco Systems expands its legal department – into Bangalore. Jones Day opens a new office – in Dubai. With the legal profession going global, many in the industry have found themselves faced with the new challenge of creating working teams that span thousands of miles and multiple cultures. Following in the footsteps of the many other major industries that have jumped ponds and explored offshore in the last decade, the legal world suddenly has a lot to learn about cross-continental business and management.

At Clutch Group, our legal process outsourcing offices span 11 hours of time zones and two continents. We have quickly learned that while managing a global legal workforce comes with a plethora of distinctive opportunities and benefits, growing our legal operations overseas successfully, inevitably involves overcoming equally distinctive barriers in both logistical and cultural arenas. It's hard enough to get a handful of people in a conference room to effectively communicate, formulate feasible plans, and execute projects – how do you create and manage successful teams that are separated by oceans? How do you work efficiently as

a group when your workforce is never awake at the same time?

Although there are hundreds of strategies to improve global legal team performance, many tactics and policies come back to a few central concepts that are vital to making global teams work:

Create a virtual workspace. The first and most obvious obstacle to running a successful international legal team is logistics – questions can't be answered by walking down the hall or picking up the phone and problems can't be solved over a quick working lunch. Many companies struggle with high volumes of emails, multiple drafts of documents, and misplaced information. Others struggle with how to keep projects on deadline and project participants equally informed.

Clutch Group uses the server program Microsoft Office Sharepoint to increase organization and efficiency. This workspace collaboration software allows everyone – no matter what time it is anywhere – to work together, pool information, maintain task lists, and brainstorm. In addition, regularly scheduled weekly meetings at appropriate times for both offices also work to keep all team members on the same page even when they aren't on the same continent – even if it means scheduling the meetings either very early or very late in the workday.

There's no such thing as too much communication. When it comes to both logistical and cultural considerations, there's never a bad time to repeat yourself, or overstate a point. When you factor in possible language barriers, bad connections, and cultural differences in conversation, there is little room for over-communication. Be upfront. State the obvious. And most importantly – don't assume anything.

For example, at Clutch Group we have learned that it is uncommon for colleagues in India to speak up when they don't understand or disagree with a point. Discussions between American colleagues tend to be more fluid and unstructured, with less deference shown to superiors. These small cultural differences can be hugely detrimental to a project or timeline – but the problem disappears when everyone makes an extra effort to be clear, candid and forthcoming.

Conduct a strategic analysis of organizational planning and execution. Even if a global workforce may create a greater number of miscommunications and snafus, uniform procedures and effective protocol can curb most damage. When you are so far away from the physical workings of an office, it is easy to overlook or ignore the basic tools and methodology in place and instead focus on end results. However, knowing the workflow patterns and

By Joseph T. Kearney. Joe is the Washington, DC Managing Director for Clutch Group.

procedures offshore will not only increase understanding but also prevent mistakes.

At Clutch Group, escalation plans serve as a model for dealing with potential problems and grid possible solutions. These plans outline the responsibilities and schedules of overseas employees, making it easier to handle issues and unforeseen circumstances. Procedures and processes are also scrutinized in a quarterly deep-dive analysis, which serves as a big-picture look at how operations can be further understood, optimized and standardized.

Explore the local culture. Cultural differences can be a two-way road of complications that runs the gamut from how to greet your manager to how to assign a project to how to eat your food in a restaurant. Unlike basic planning and management concerns, cultural concerns can be highly sensitive and harder to confront with concrete plans. More importantly, they can cause serious miscommunications, quality issues, confusion, and even damaged business relationships.

The solution is not to alter, suppress, or curb cultural differences – or even to assimilate others into

different practices or frames of mind. Rather, the same two central philosophies of communication and awareness that curb logistical issues can resolve most concerns. Instead of training Indian workers to value American ideals – or training Americans to adopt an Indian work ethic – it is more effective to train both teams to understand where the differences lie and to address the differences accordingly.

Business trips and travel can be an effective way to increase understanding – both of the basic offshore office procedures and of life overseas in general. Learning the background, traditions, food, and music of your offshore office won't just bring you closer to your coworkers, it might prevent potential problems down the road. If you are familiar with Indian history, then you won't be surprised when the Bangalore office is closed on October 2 – Mahatma Gandhi's birthday.

Training on both sides of the ocean is key. Although it is normal to teach employees about a new software program or office procedure that aids global teamwork, it may seem awkward to train them in matters of culture. However, both types of training

are vital in the success of your international legal organization. In essence, training employees allows everyone to learn from past mistakes and build a solid foundation of common knowledge.

On the U.S. side, new Clutch Group managers will listen to but not participate in international conference calls in order to familiarize themselves with any differences in procedure. On the Indian side, attorneys and other legal professionals are briefed on all aspects of our company's expectations and needs. Both locations are encouraged to share what they have learned on the job with coworkers and to embrace differences.

If your entire global team has an open and aware attitude toward cultural differences, most miscommunications can be resolved with a few simple and candid questions. Similarly, logistical hitches and hiccups can be prevented with proper foresight and the establishment of clear schedules and procedures. Just as in any relationship, business or otherwise, constant feedback and regular communication can carry a team forward, especially when paired with constructive formal training. ■