

Age of Off Shoring and Remote Participation Drives 'Virtual' ICT Project Teams

*~ Synergy Management Solutions identifies seven steps to
successfully managing virtual project teams ~*

SYDNEY – 30 November, 2006 – According to leading management consultancy firm, Synergy Management Solutions, the increasing prevalence of off shoring and remote participation in major ICT projects requires IT professionals to develop new skills to manage what is essentially, a 'virtual project team'.

Synergy defines a virtual project team as a group of individuals brought together from various sources to achieve a common objective, but who, due to location, rarely if ever see each other in person. The major distinguishing feature of a virtual project team is that the project manager is physically apart from virtually all other team members. As such, they have to rely almost exclusively on communication methods such as phone, email, videoconferencing and instant messaging.

The virtual team may be comprised variously of in house IT staff, seconded staff from other departments, vendor(s) or specialist contractors such as software and application developers, often located in other countries.

"More and more major ICT projects are utilising off shore expertise and distributed teams, especially in the areas of software and application development," said Susanne Moore, Managing Director of Synergy Management Solutions.

"Large scale projects usually employ a significant number of people, all with varying levels of expertise. Mostly they are selected due to the requirement for specific skills and abilities, but often because they're the only resource from the stakeholder organisation that is available to be part of the project team. This means personnel are often in a multitude of locations and possess varying levels of understanding of what it's like to work on a virtual project team," said Moore.

"Whilst virtual project teams carry huge potential for outstanding delivery of objectives, the geographic spread and multi-organisational differences of project personnel presents a unique set of challenges for those responsible for successful delivery, typically the Project Manager."

Synergy Management Solutions have identified seven key areas that must be addressed in managing virtual project teams:

- 1. Leadership strength** – the project manager must conduct themselves in a way that has all members of the virtual project team knowing they are in charge and responsible for the project. They must exude authentic presence, whether in person, speaking over the phone or communicating via email.
- 2. Intuition** – the project manager must develop 'intuitive awareness', anticipating the pitfalls associated with not being co-located and 'visible'. They must have an excellent phone manner, great perceptive capability and more than the usual complex project management ability to 'read between the lines'.
- 3. Support from Senior Management** – it is imperative that project managers have top-down support from senior management and a mandate to do what is required to achieve the desired project outcomes. If subversive elements are present, they should be dealt with by the project manager swiftly, with authority and full support from the project sponsor(s).

4. Communication – project managers of virtual teams need to ensure absolute consistency and regularity of communication through the many means available to them such as phone, email, video and audio conference calls, intranet, newsletters and instant messaging to name a few. Project budgets must allow for additional contingency to deal with the complex communications requirements associated with geographically dispersed team members.

5. Roles and Responsibilities – project teams are often cobbled together with little or no clarity around roles and responsibilities. When working in a virtual team, it is doubly important that each team member has a job description and that they understand what is required of them.

6. NEVER assume – whilst assumption is a poor management practice in any environment, in the case of virtual projects teams it can be disastrous. Project managers need to check and re-check, clarify and re-clarify with team members to ensure common understanding. Managers must provide specific illustration of required responses within specified timeframes when communicating tasks.

7. Collaborative Tools – there are now numerous online ASP-based collaboration tools available that can help virtual project teams work smarter and more efficiently. Project managers need to be able to sell the benefits of such tools to their steering committee or project sponsor to have budget made available for these systems. Simplistic project management 'tools' such as the standalone version of Microsoft Project are inadequate for virtual project teams.

“Managing geographically dispersed and potentially culturally diverse project teams requires a complete rethink on the management of the human resources involved,” added Moore. “Project managers must think globally, but act locally in striving to understand and negotiate cultural drivers particular to various regions”.

“Without strong empathy and good cross-pollination amongst the various teams within the larger project group, problems and difficulties can easily arise that can consume management and bring additional time, performance and quality delays. In the case of off shoring and remote participation, these hurdles can result in the erosion of any financial gain, or worse, erase it completely.”

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About Synergy Management Solutions

Synergy Management Solutions is an Australian owned and run business. The principals are Susanne Moore and Philip Dartnell, who between them have over 30 years of business and project management experience in and around Information Communications Technology (ICT).

The company was formed in 1997 and has completed many consulting engagements, mostly centred around Project & Program Management and the associated sourcing strategies across a wide variety of ICT outsourcing, software development, infrastructure transition and enterprise systems implementations.

Synergy has been engaged on projects at major Australian companies & government agencies such as Sydney Water, IAG, CITEC, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), Collex, Tomago Aluminium, the Department of Primary Industries, The University of Newcastle and multi-national & Asia Pacific based companies such as American Express, Kasikorn Bank (Thailand), Alcatel and Unisys. The company are also works closely with the Australian Government via the New Export Developers Program, through Austrade, to export professional services into Asia.