

ARL™ News

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Do you work in a virtual team?

Challenges and Lessons to make it work

ARLNews interviewed Catherine Nowaski, **Director of e-Learning at Eastman Kodak Company**. She joined Kodak in 1979 and has been working with the global e-Learning team since December of 1999, taking over formal leadership in July of 2001. One of the special projects she is in charge of is launching the E-Learning system in the company. This means she works in a **virtual team with colleagues from other countries**, to jointly develop the system.

ARLNews: **Catherine, how would you describe the task of this virtual team?**

Our goal is to optimize Kodak's shift to e-learning by creating and implementing a global strategy enabling employees to **learn anytime, anywhere**. The vision is that Kodak employees will access all types of learning and development options (web-based training, virtual classes, Kodak online content, classroom registrations, assessment and development planning tools) all from one portal called "Kodak e-Campus." We are currently focusing on getting the Information Technology infrastructure in place to support this vision—leveraging our resources and learning together along the way.

ARLNews: **Who are the members of the team?**

We are truly a diverse, worldwide team. The team includes the regional learning and development directors from Europe, Latin America, US, China, and Japan; managers of training and product training ; US delivery coordinator; IT specialists in program management and systems architecture; and myself as project leader. There are currently 7 women and 8 men participating. Our countries of national origin include France, Cuba, Brazil, USA, China, Singapore, and Japan.

ARLNews: **Do all the members have a similar background/position in their organization?**

No, we have hierarchical and functional diversity too. Managers and individual contributors represent HR, IT, and Learning functions. We try to value members for their expertise and commitment rather than their formal position. We even have varying ages and length of tenure, which ranges from 6 months to over 30 years as an employee of Eastman Kodak.

ARLNews: **How do you communicate?**

For the past year and a half, we have been having virtual meetings for 1-2 hours each week. We use a web conferencing tool to share visuals and a long distance telephone service for the audio. We have a Lotus Notes based "team room," which holds all our team documents. And, we use lots of emails!

ARLNews: **Do you have a special way to set up your meetings?**

We are experimenting with a number of web conferencing/virtual classroom tools. They require **good meeting etiquette** (agendas, action item records, written meeting notes) just like any other meeting. When we began the initiative at the end of 1999, we were able to meet face-to-face each quarter to create our vision, strategy, and implementation plans. As travel and cost restrictions came into play, we tried having video conferencing, holding workshops for three-hours each morning for several days. There are definite skills involved in video conferencing such as knowing how to operate the camera so that you can see people's expressions, creating clear visuals, and pacing the conversation to accommodate the audio delay. We haven't used this media in a while, but as some new members have joined recently I think we should give it another try.

ARLNews: **What have you learned so far from this experience?**



I think my biggest learning was in finding new ways to “**equalize the playing field**” so that everyone’s voice could be heard and attended to. Examples are:

? **Calling in from our separate offices or homes**, rather than having all the Rochester, NY-based people meet in a conference room. Suggested by our Latin American learning director, this ensures that we don’t have a conversation dominated by Rochester people with others just listening in.

? **Valuing the silence**. Every personality is different, of course, but some cultures (like my own in the US) tend to be less comfortable with the silences that others need for reflection. It takes practice for the team to learn not to “talk over each other” and to notice when someone has dropped out of the conversation because an unfamiliar term or colloquialism was used.

? **Capturing thoughts and comments on the electronic white board during the meeting**. This not only eliminates the need to recreate notes for record keeping, but also helps everyone to stay on track because participants see and hear the words spoken. So, it’s a good tool for multilingual teams and accommodates participants who are visual.

? **Taking the time to dialog**. Given our different time zones, we conduct much of our business by email. However, I’ve learned never to try to make an important decision solely by this method. We need to use our weekly meetings to talk about issues and understand what each member is thinking before we commit to a path forward.

ARLNews: What are the biggest challenges when working in such a setting?

Just what you would expect: **time and distance**. Our Asian colleagues are calling at midnight from home (where they may not have the computer network available), whereas I get up at 5 a.m. to start the meeting on time. Then too, like many corporations, we are now faced with travel restrictions. When you cannot see a person’s body language, you need to be even more attentive to who is speaking and tone of voice.

ARLNews: What did you discover as the “key success factors” for efficient virtual teams?

Critical success factors are probably the same as with any kind of team; it’s just that the distance intensifies the need.

📁 **Good organization**: Agendas must be pre-planned; documents and action item lists should be stored online where everyone can reach them.

📁 **Shared responsibilities**: The various components of our strategy are being managed out of different locations, but eventually the pieces will all need to fit together.

📁 **Respect**: Team members need to show that they value each other’s skills, cultures, experience levels, and personal styles. If not, it is too easy for people to become disengaged and the whole team suffers.

📁 **Trust**: I have a story to illustrate this. A few weeks ago, I was really discouraged about the project delays and bureaucracy we were facing, and I asked the team if they really thought our vision was even possible. I’m not sure why I did that; I didn’t have a preconceived idea of how the conversation would turn out. But, even though we have some newer members whom I haven’t known long, I trust this team enough to share my feelings. They really “picked me up”: re-committing to our original vision while also suggesting some “quick wins” that we can show now for our efforts.

ARLNews: What advice would you give to other colleagues who have to work in virtual teams?

Don’t underestimate the power of what a committed team can accomplish. Use the technology available and don’t be afraid of making mistakes with it. Every meeting is an opportunity to learn and grow as a team. Face-to-face communication is ideal, but we live in a world of tradeoffs. Try to be creative in applying team-building skills. How about sharing pictures and biographies upfront? Could you use a digital ice-breaker, or the private chat function to draw out quiet members? No matter how awkward your initial meetings may seem, you will always end up producing a better product because you tapped into the diverse talents of your colleagues. 🌍



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