

HOW TO LAUNCH A PROJECT WITH PEOPLE YOU'VE NEVER MET

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Reflective article
NoventID | Team Academy
HES-SO Valais/Wallis
Semester 2
May 2021

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Introduction

In order for you to understand the content of this article it is important that we explain the context that led us to write it.

We are two teampreneurs¹ of NoventID, a company we founded within the Team Academy program of the HES-SO Valais/Wallis. Every year this program asks us to organize a learning trip. This is a trip with the objective to make us discover a new culture of entrepreneurship. Therefore we are looking to contact a school that operates on the same pedagogical model as ours namely : learning by doing. This year we contacted the team of first year F.L.I.P. students of the ProAkademia school (University of Applied Sciences) in Tampere.

Unfortunately the sanitary conditions (Covid-19 pandemic) did not allow us to travel so we were forced to organize this trip digitally. Thus we have never met physically and only know each other through virtual tools such as "Zoom" or "Teams".

From the organization of this trip was born the creation of a project in the textile industry. Although the subject of this project is not the main focus of this article, it is important to know that it is an idea that emerged in the mind of Jamie who approached his colleague Ella in order to carry out his project. Upon meeting us Jamie and Ella found that we were exactly the people they needed to make their potential project a success. They contacted us and asked if we would be interested in joining their project to which we replied « Yes ! ». In addition to the incredible idea on which this project is based it is simply a golden opportunity to collaborate with foreign students ...

... But also a great challenge ! Especially in terms of communication and trust. Indeed all four of us have to express ourselves in English even though it is not our mother tongue. If communication is of utmost importance in any project imagine when we don't speak the same language. In addition building strong bonds and trust is a challenge for us as we see each other very little and virtually !

In this article we will focus on these two key areas namely **communication** and **trust** in order to collaborate in a remote team.

¹ Entrepreneurs of the Team Academy program (learning by doing) of the HES-SO Valais/Wallis

Reasoning

In some of the meetings we have had so far we have observed some fears related to the fact that we are a group where half of the members live in a different country than the other half. We have noticed among other things that :

- it can be difficult to be understood in English
- it can be stressful not to understand what has been said
- it is essential to be well organized and to communicate for our appointments (especially with the time difference, the Finns are an hour ahead of us)
- it is essential to establish a climate of trust from the beginning
- it is important to be constantly sure that there is a general understanding (rephrasing)
- we have to give the other person much more time to express themselves (even if it means giving them time to translate what they want to say on the internet)
- we have to have the courage to speak up (not to seem disinterested in the project)
- our way of working is very different and that there is thus a need for organization (for example they don't always plan the meetings might ask for calls during the same day)

Thus we wanted to discover how to manage the relationships of a remote team in order to maintain a healthy climate and allow the project to grow.

We know that the enthusiasm felt at the beginning of the project can come to an end if we don't take care of our relationships and don't make an effort to find the information necessary to allow everyone to flourish within the project. With NoventID we have seen the gigantic benefits of meeting face-to-face such as the empathy that emanates from these gatherings, and are therefore aware of the impact that distance and digitalization have on team cohesion.

Moreover we know the richness of being an international project team especially in terms of the power of our extended networks over a larger area and want to invest a lot of our time and hope in this project.

This article offers concrete tools to federate a remote or simply agile team where individual freedom is perceived as a professional asset. As a result NoventID will be able to benefit from the tips and tools provided in this document to improve group cohesion.

Research

While geographic scope offers a wealth of opportunities, it has been shown to intensify the complexity of communication and coordination. So what is necessary if not essential, to put in place in a context where team members cannot physically meet ?

In their work « Remoteability : 12 Tactics to Manage the Culture of Your Suddenly Remote Team » in reaction to the recent virus that has turned things upside down, Russ Hill, Jared Jones and Tanner Corbridge explain that it is fundamental because of the change in the way of working, to adapt the way of managing. The authors believe that it is now essential to show a lot of empathy (especially virtually) to reinforce individual responsibility and to be present, accessible and transparent².

In order to strengthen individual responsibility it would be wise to increase the agility and freedom of the team members. It is therefore a question of increasing the capacity to trust one's peers, by seeking to communicate with them and understand them. The focus is no longer on actual working hours but on productivity. However it is still essential to keep a precise record of one's working hours and attendance in order to evaluate the efficiency of the result.

It is also essential to constantly ensure the well-being of everyone and to allow each individual to be authentic.

On the other hand it is preferable that meetings are efficient and relevant in order to reduce stress and tension. A meeting should focus on two main issues for each team member :

1. What did I accomplish ?
2. What am I planning to accomplish for the next meeting ?

Running remote co-founder Liam Martin says it's essential to offset the physical interaction of team members. To do this there should be a constant virtual chatroom so that colleagues can be in continuous contact without feeling like they're intruding. Indeed the overload of emails and personal messages generates stress that turns into dissatisfaction. This leads to a lack of productivity. According to him the following order of communication should ideally be respected³ :

1. Visual
2. By audio

² Corbridge, T. Jones, J. Hill, R. (2020). *Remoteability : 12 Tactics to Manage the Culture of Your Suddenly Remote Team*.

³ Running Remote (21 novembre 2018). *The 21 Rules for Managing Remote Teams* [Vidéo]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLDSokWCbFY&ab_channel=RunningRemote

3. Textual (first by chat and then email as a last resort)

Eventually he mentions the need to have a meeting rhythm. As he says : « What doesn't get measured, doesn't get managed ! ». Indeed too many distractions will interfere with the set objectives if there is no checkpoint. He therefore advises to organize a meeting at least once a week adding key performance indicators in order to be able to measure the efficiency of each person.

Ricardo Fernandez, remote manager, advises to meet physically at least once a year for a few days in order to create stronger links by discovering specificities that are difficult to detect virtually. This has a huge impact on the cohesion of the group and allows for the development of real empathy⁴.

Research into the extent to which IT tools help manage remote construction projects in Saudi Arabia shows that the biggest problems with remote management come from inadequate traditional communication systems. These systems cannot meet the intense need for project information and effective communication within the project team. And this lack can lead to fundamental changes in project management extending the famous golden triangle - quality, time and cost - to sustainability, project team and stakeholders. Internal and external team satisfaction and health and safety issues are now top priorities⁵.

Knowing this it is essential to really put people at the center of our attention and to adopt a project management system adapted to a remote team.

⁴ TEDx Talks (15 juin 2017). *Managing Cross Cultural Remote Teams | Ricardo Fernandez | TEDxIESEBarcelona* [Vidéo]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIoAkFpN8wQ&ab_channel=TEDxTalks

⁵ Sidawi, B. (2012). *Potential Use of Communications and Project Management Systems in Remote Construction Projects: The Case of Saudi Electric Company*. Journal of Engineering Project and Production Management

Applications

In our project we have found that it is essential to have great adaptive and understanding skills. Cultural differences can lead to great misunderstandings so it is necessary to contextualize each interaction to avoid this from happening. It is essential to be conscientious of one's actions and words and it is rich to gain patience.

In order to implement the tips we have discovered, here are some things we have (or will) put in place :

1. Slack as a constant virtual communication platform

To stop getting lost between private messages (WhatsApp and others), emails, various platforms also offering communication channels (Snapchat, Teams, Instagram, etc) and to concentrate all our communications whether professional or for fun, we decided to opt for **Slack**. This platform will allow us to gather all information in one place and ease our minds.

2. Gather.town to gamify but above all to intensify our long-distance relationships

During our second part of the learning trip Jean-Marc Fillistorf, a Swiss entrepreneur at the head of Gammadia (a management company), introduced us to an interesting platform dedicated to virtually reproduce, in two dimensions, our offices and our team members : **Gather.town**. The platform offers the possibility to walk around the fictitious offices and to approach our colleagues as long as they are present and available. The application then offers the possibility to open a chat or even a video conference call. Many other features are available such as the conference room for team meetings or teleportation doors allowing to move more quickly from one place to another in the premises. This software allows to offer interaction and this with a lot of fun. But above all it remains very useful and relevant especially in order to compensate for the lack of real interaction. We are currently building our mutual offices !

3. A weekly meeting

We set up a two-hour team meeting every Wednesday afternoon taking into account the one-hour time difference, where we determine if the set goals have been met and set the next ones. Unfortunately this semester has been marred by the late arrival of appointments for our training sessions (previously agreed but not scheduled) forcing us to find compromises and even cancel some appointments. This is obviously a learning process that we would like to enhance next semester by determining in advance, for

example, the days potentially dedicated to training sessions⁶. In this way we will be able to block a time slot specifically for this project meeting.

On the other hand we will also meet internally (Joshua and Manu) once a week for an hour, to exchange on our progresses and questions and this will also be the case for Jamie and Ella.

4. Attendance and punctuality

In our research we discovered the importance of presence and punctuality especially with a remote team, in order to generate trust. Because we have so much freedom it is essential that we are extremely professional in our « rare » appointments.

5. Transparent and accessible project management

Jamie as the project leader, wants to set up project management on **ClickUp**. An application which assigns tasks and deadlines but also to group the various documents to share related to the project. To complete this tool we created a **Miro**⁷ at the start of the project in order to have a common place to group our values, missions, goals, business model visions, inspirations, ideas and questions.

In addition **Teams** allows us, not only meeting virtually, but to have an effective collaboration thanks to its cloud allowing to modify, add or delete information live on our documents.

6. Quality time

Being at a distance unfortunately does not allow for relaxing moments together which is an essential element for the success of a project. Being constantly focused on work cannot be beneficial in the long run.

In order to strengthen our bonds we have decided to have one session per month to exchange, get to know each other, laugh and have fun. Work is not allowed but alcohol is recommended ! This way we create the mutual trust necessary for a remote team.

On the other hand we all want to get together at least once a year, physically. Ella and Jamie immediately wrote down their goal to travel to Switzerland on the 30th of

⁶ Sessions dedicated to sharing specific learning (example : project management training session)

⁷ **Mural** equivalent allowing to list all ideas, common and individual

September 2021 with the money generated by the project. Then it will be our turn to travel to Finland to meet our partners in crime !

7. Be authentic

It is futile to try to pretend to be who we are not in order to suit our peers. Even more if they are not there ! What would be their surprise at our first real meeting ?

This is why we want to share our **Leonardo 3.4.5** profiles⁸ as well as the results of our COFs⁹ so that our Finnish partners can get to know us better but above all, understand us better.

We would also like to give them the COF test and receive one of their personality tests for the same purposes as mentioned above.

Finally our last wish would be to introduce a tool well known in the Team Academy program : the 360° evaluation. This involves evaluating ourselves individually and then among our peers in order to discover what we do well and what we could improve. This prevents us from falling into bad habits without realizing their negative impact and allows us to assimilate our skills and put them to use in the project.

⁸ Swiss personality test

⁹ Philippe Rosinski's Cultural Orientation Test

Conclusion

Following our research and reflections we are really happy to have written this article because it taught us a lot about ourselves (why we could react in a certain way) but also about group cohesion.

We have a common feeling that we have learned essential elements for the continuation of our studies not only concerning our international project but also our daily collaboration with the members of NoventID, a company that also works with an extremely flexible system.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the HES-SO Valais/Wallis, the founders of the Team Academy program as well as its coaches who allow us to create and learn on a daily basis.

But above all we would like to thank our dear colleagues Ella and Jamie who offered us a golden opportunity to develop ourselves further. A big « Thank you ! ».

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