Chapter XII

International Issues

The teams that we’ve worked on in the last 10 years have all been international in scope. And being a member of a virtual team for a United States corporation, but being physically located in another country, can have its own set of problems, including time zone differences, infrastructure challenges, cultural issues, and language barriers. From an international perspective, we interviewed individuals in Australia, France, and Japan. We spoke with two members of the Hewlett-Packard PC COE team (discussed in Chapter 8), Geoff Markley, from Australia, and David Brehm, who spent part of his PC COE years living in California, and part living in France. We also interviewed Takehiko Kato from Japan who came to work in the US for four months in order to build stronger ties with his teammates and experiment with technology that was not yet available in Japan.

Australia

“In Asia-Pacific, the economics of flying everyone around every second week is prohibitively expensive. As a result of that, virtual teams have become a lot more commonplace.”
Because of Australia’s location in respect to the US and the rest of the Asia-Pacific area, Australia has good reason to invest in virtual teams and meetings. Geoff Markley, based in Melbourne, Australia, comments:

The first is, if you’re going to do any kind of global job, Australia is the worst place in the world to be, from that perspective. The closest place is Singapore which is 7 and a half hours by plane, and the U.S. is some large amount of hours after that. So in terms of when you physically had to be places around the other side of the world, there was lots of travel.

However, working on an international virtual team while residing in Australia does have its challenges. The first and foremost: time zone issues:

If you’re going to be working in virtual teams, especially in Australia, working in a regional or global role, you tend to be working non-standard business hours, just because of the range of time zones across even Asia Pacific. You start at New Zealand, which is 2 hours ahead of the East Coast of Australia, and you go through to India, which is 4/5 hours (depending on the time of year) behind Australia—even that is a very wide time zone range. And then mix Europe or the U.S. into that, and you end up working very strange hours. In the case of the U.S., when Daylight Savings changes twice yearly, there is a 2 hour time shift between Australia and the U.S., and so meetings go from starting at 11:00/midnight at one time of the year, to starting at 2:00am/3:00am for the rest of the year.

Because of the large number of Asian languages, language barriers are often an issue for virtual teams in Asia-Pacific, a problem that has improved in recent years as English has emerged as the default language of IT.

The road to integration of virtual teams is certainly heading in the right direction as it becomes much more of the norm, and the fluency in English in a lot of the countries such as China and Korea where English fluency wasn’t high a number of years ago is certainly helping that, and creating the ability for virtual teams, because the only common language in Asia is English.