White Paper 2021-07

Building Remote Project Teams in Project Start-Up Phase

We work in new and more 'virtual' ways, a development accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic - and our ways of working will continue to change in the years to come. Remote teams are today for many organisations a permanent change to work life that also implies a wider geographical spread - project offices are not an exception. As we face the complexity of multi-location and changes in work setting – from home or a different location than our organisation's main hub(s) - we need to reflect this change in the way we build our teams.

What does it take to transfer building efficient teams for large complex projects to a virtual setting?

In this White Paper we share our experience of 'building virtual teams' in project start-up phases. They stem from our own experience, discussions in our network and our collaboration with clients who already start up these large, complex projects in the new highly virtual setting.

What is the new 'remote teams reality' of large complex project teams?

The implications of remote teams' work for large complex projects are many. Especially considering, as we stated in one of our early White Papers [2013-01]: *'Projects are first of all a human adventure'.*

People will do the work for years to come. They will continue to enable projects to be delivered safely, with the right quality in an efficient way. Therefore, most of the key success factors - for large, complex projects without a doubt – will stay the same: the right processes, efficient systems and

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skilled, motivated people working as a close team with an emotional engagement in project success. Work done remotely is not a new phenomenon, but we have seen two major implications on planning our work and forming large complex project teams due to the more widespread remote work reality.

First – *the scale and permanence of work done remotely* is new. This has many implications on building high performing teams. Each individual working from home is in a way a separate 'work entity' needing to be integrated in the team.

Second – the *world is now at our disposal*. Well planned, organised, and aligned we can benefit from this new remote reality – being more efficient and have 'the right person on the job at the right time' – from home or at location.

We need to leverage the opportunities and mitigate the risks to large complex projects when building the right, high-performing team.

The project start-up process is more important than ever

The start-up process is key to building a high performing project team, reduce complexity and plan for high quality delivery in a disbursed global organisation.

These 'start-up urgencies' that we previously described in our White Papers regarding the start-up process [2018-12, 2016-13] stay the same. They have in our view become even more critical for projects that will work in a highly virtual setting. Whereas projects used to meet physically for many of the start-up activities (and we continue recommending that they be face-to-face when possible due to efficiency gains and teambuilding aspects of the phase), we now in some cases need to adjust to plan for remote project start-ups. This calls for new ways of planning, aligning and facilitating these virtual activities and workshops. *What are good practices when remotely starting up such virtual team projects?*

Field findings when building remote project teams

Through our field findings - communication with our network and clients; and according to our project experience - we have identified the following 'key guidance' for building remote project teams in the start-up phase:

- Mobilise the right people at the right time
- Take charge explicitly of the culture and team formation
- Effectively facilitate the key virtual start-up workshops

Mobilise the right people at the right time
A major opportunity today - when more people can work from other locations than the main hubs - is to *commit the right competence at the right place and mobilised at the right time*. In addition, the new ways of working open for new synergies and an even closer collaboration across organisations including between owners and contractors [described in White Paper 2018-15]. Where we were previously divided by office and organisational borders, we can now come closer, e.g. through digital tools. Extended enterprise work settings are today easier to setup and maintain.

Synergy aspects to consider are e.g. technical and/or managerial competency; proximity to key locations such as supplier locations or construction yards; local, language or cultural knowledge (also increasing diversity); hubs etc.

Working from home, it is *more difficult to identify under-utilised and demotivated team members.* To stay motivated, engaged and to contribute effectively, people need to be given meaningful tasks, clear responsibilities, clear deadlines, and clarity of how their work fits within the whole. This can only be achieved by mobilising people at the right time - when they are needed.

To utilise competencies in these new ways we need to plan early, foresee a longer planning horizon and continuously communicate with, assist and motivate our team.

Take charge explicitly of the culture and team formation

An important aspect of the virtual project team formation – and the *desired* project culture – is that it will not form automatically. Especially if large scale remote work is new to the project team. The culture and associated behaviours, roles and responsibilities need to be set at the start of the project and maintained along the project phases. *Take charge explicitly of this culture forming process!* Consider for example creating a more elaborate behaviour charter document for team members to sign and start every weekly meeting with an inclusion moment allowing people to speak about personal and professional successes and struggles.

> **Don't forget your clients and suppliers! Setting the right culture and way of working between organisations at the start is now even more important than before for speed and to mitigate risks.**

Planning virtual team building activities and continuous culture alignment requires more dedication and facilitation skills than the face-to-face equivalents [elaborated on in White Paper 2021-06]. These activities do not necessarily have to be separate from other start-up workshops, but *the team building aspect and the importance of these early activities need to be considered.* Also, it may take longer to achieve the same result as in face-to-face situations since remote meetings typically need to be shorter and more frequent. This needs to be taken into account when planning project start-up activities.

Remote team building activities require active participation and contribution from all participants, and for team members to explicitly confirm consent to charters, house rules, communication, meeting structures etc. In a virtual setting the direct feedback is more difficult (the body language and overview of all participants is to a large extend lost etc.). In remote team formation meetings, accommodate for other ways to check in on team alignment - e.g. using. collaborative tools such as digital whiteboards - and *insist on cameras always on!* We recommend 'cameras on' to be part of the house rules and culture agreed on for all video meetings.

We believe that efficient remote work needs to be built on a culture on trust, respect, and transparency. This allows for *more constructive conversations (promoting healthy conflict), larger autonomy and faster decision making* in these complex networks constituted of people working from their home. The role of managers is therefore changing in order to coach, motivate, teach, and facilitate the right conversations. The leaders need to adapt to this change to facilitate process, system and people interaction, and emphasise the importance of the culture.

Also - *don't forget your clients and suppliers!* Setting the right culture and way of working between organisations at the start is now even more important than before for speed and to mitigate risks. [White Paper Workshop acceleration for project start-up 2017-13]

Effectively facilitate the key virtual start-up workshops

A change often mentioned by our clients is that the important 'coffee machine' conversations do not happen today. Thereby the room to 'wiggle' things in place later in the project is reduced. We need new and more accessible and visual communication in the *alignment at project start-up of all key project parameters*: Project execution plan, detailed scope and contract review, roles and responsibilities, risk and opportunities, schedule, work breakdown structure (WBS) etc. As we describe in our White Paper [2017-13] each of the key project areas will need its own attention at the project start-up, preferably by organising and *facilitating start-up workshop*s (virtual) on each of these themes, with the right competencies present.

As the start-up process of a large complex project is in itself a major task - in a busy and critical phase of the project - properly planning and facilitating these virtual start-up workshops is challenging. And in these workshops, the project management team, and other key team members, best *add value by actively taking part in discussions* and output creation - not being tied up in a facilitator role. Therefore, many project organisations have seen the benefit of bringing in support for planning and facilitating the start-up workshops. This support can be provided by internal or external facilitators. Workshop facilitation support is seen as even more valuable in the virtual start-up context as the quality of these meetings is highly dependent on experience, efficiently using digital collaborative tools, the facilitation, compiling output etc.

We recommend bringing in a facilitator with sufficient knowledge of the topic to save time for key people (before and during the session) and ensure process, decision and output compilation efficiency.

After completion of these facilitated workshops, objectives should be clearly defined for each of the areas. The team members also need to agree or be informed on how to continuously update and keep informed on progress and upcoming activities on these project areas in

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2021-07 rev 0

the virtual space. *Don't forget to communicate to the whole team how to get access to these key project parameters!*

Summary

Remote work settings are not a new reality of large complex projects, but it is now seen at a much larger scale and with permanence. This has many implications on remote teams, especially in the early phases of the projects, when project goals, culture, ways of working and tools are being developed and incorporated in the project. Important and informal 'coffee machine' conversations will not happen and thereby the room to 'wiggle' things in place later in the project is reduced. Planning projects for remote work early in the project is essential for project success.

We have identified 'key guidance' for building remote project teams in early project phases:

- Mobilise the right people at the right time, and keep them motivated while dedicated to the project.
- Take charge explicitly of the culture and team formation – and ensure that the agreed culture is known to all project team members and kept alive.
- Facilitate the key virtual start-up meetings – in a virtual setting the success of the start-up activities is more dependent on planning and facilitation skills.

References:

1) White Paper 2013-01 A Manifesto - Projects are First of All a Human Adventure: Why You Can't Manufacture Projects on a Standardized Assembly Line
2) White Paper 2018-12 How to Handle Large Complex Projects That Involve Multiple Offices Globally
3) White Paper 2016-13 Project Start-Up Essentials
4) White Paper 2018-15 How to Reap Benefits from Improved Collaboration between Owner, Contractors and Subcontractors'
5) White Paper 2021-06 'Guiding Stars' on How to Deliver Large Complex Projects Successfully in a world changed by the pandemic
6) White Paper 2017-13 Workshop acceleration for project start-up

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