



## Managing Dispersed Project Teams

Seminar 126 held at CMS Cameron McKenna, London  
7th June 2006

### Summary

#### Key Conclusions

- Pay particular attention to career development of individuals in remote or distant locations
- Collaboration technology greatly supports communication and the transfer of best practice between dispersed teams
- Seek a balance between central and local control
- Walking about and listening is even more important with dispersed teams
- The management approach should be flexible enough to accommodate different cultures, languages and work habits
- People need to be trained how to work effectively in isolation or in remote locations
- When and wherever possible, bring dispersed teams together through social events
- Devise key performance indicators (KPI) which are specifically designed to motivate dispersed teams
- Where technology is key, ensure a reliable and resilient network
- Ensure that objectives are aligned across dispersed teams

## Introduction

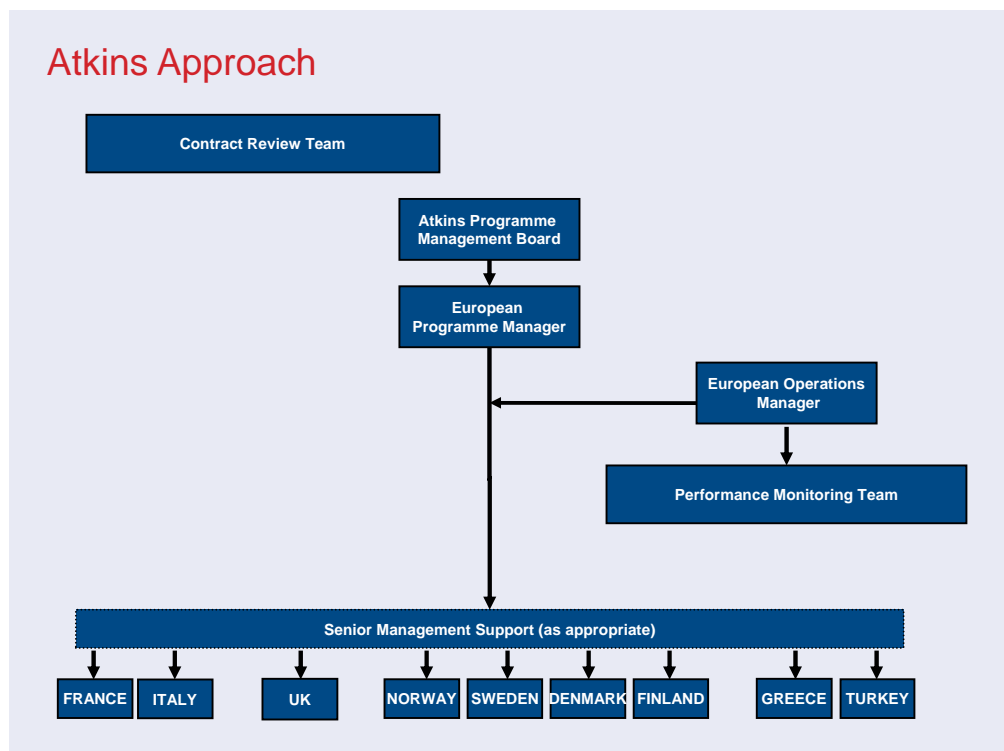
Major projects increasingly cross organisational and national boundaries, with project teams becoming more and more dispersed. This brings very real challenges for efficient organisation and management in terms of communication, consistency, security and progress reporting.

The seminar included presentations involving experience in managing a rolling series of individual projects for a major multinational client, advice on selecting the right IT infrastructure and tools to facilitate collaborative working, and the key factors in managing, motivating and coordinating people operating in dispersed project teams. The seminar concluded with an analysis of the proceedings.

## One contract, twelve countries, nine teams – a management challenge

Atkins Programme Management manages the capital works expenditure for 5,000 petrochemical retail outlets across 12 European countries, which involves thousands of individual projects. The client's drive was to move to a common management and design approach, and Atkins' role was to find best practice in the various locations and employ it where possible throughout the programme.

The Atkins approach to managing the project is outlined in the illustration below. Individual country teams have their own managers, linked to a central team which identifies particular methodologies to be deployed across the commission. Delivery rests with the individual countries, with process information filtered back to the central team.



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## Challenge continued

The management of the project and maintenance of good practice is aided by an IT-based collaborative system which enables up to date data to be shared between teams in different countries. As it is web-based it can be continually modified by the central team and is the primary means of communication for standardising approach and working practice.

People are the company's most important asset. Engaging people with the right skills and experience, who will approach the commission in an autonomous way whilst still fostering links with the central team, is vital, as is on-going training and support.

Establishing effective communication with teams is an essential ingredient in managing and motivating dispersed teams, and striking the right balance between person-to-person and remote communication is a challenge; too little face-to-face contact can cause small problems to develop into large ones.

Atkins aim to instil clear institutional processes to give a baseline for working practice, with messages kept as simple as possible and graphic images deployed to overcome differences in language. However, flexibility in dealing with differences in legislation, working practices and cultural approaches between the countries is an essential prerequisite of implementing the commission. Fostering team spirit and culture locally engenders a pride in the work and invokes a sense of competition and belonging.

## The new world of work

Over the last twenty years the work environment has changed radically. In the new global economy every client, contractor and supplier must improve project delivery, and today's technology enables people to operate globally. For example, being connected via a network means that design work can literally follow the sun, and process can be outsourced to the economy that has the comparative advantage in terms of time, cost and quality.

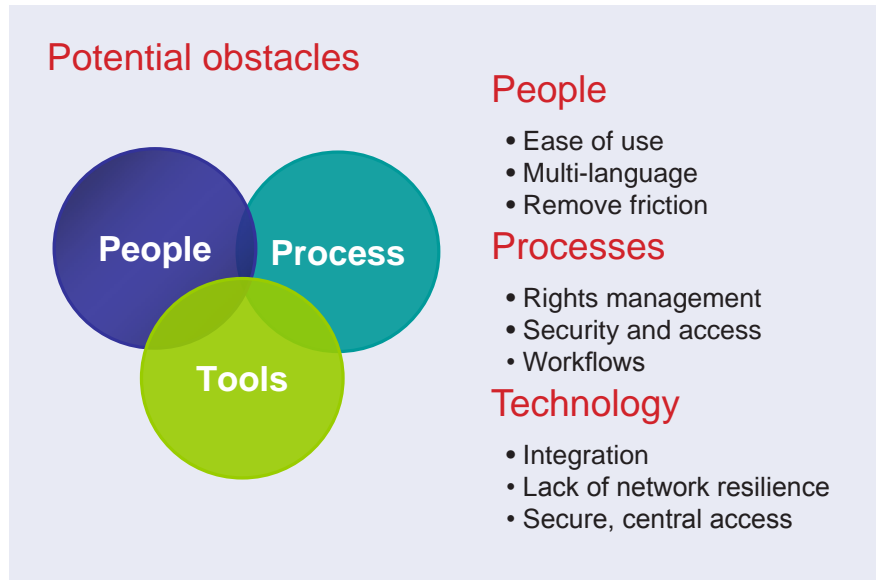
Changes in technology during the last decade have provided scope for new, flexible ways of working. Hardware is increasingly mobile (phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), laptop computers), whilst wireless technology and specialised software allow a convergence of information flow to all devices, enabling instant updating of data.

Technology allows for collaborative working across a wide range of environments, for example:

- Dissemination of client, contractor and supplier information
- Speeding the process of working together
- Smoothing the supply chain
- Spreading best practice
- Easing the process of bidding for contracts

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Whilst there are many advantages to collaborative working platforms, it is important to be aware of potential difficulties involving people, process and technology, as outlined below. Particular attention was drawn to the issue of security and access to data.



## Some requirements for managing dispersed project teams

A few of the key factors in the successful management of dispersed teams were outlined. It was noted that it is not just about dealing with geographical dispersion; process and technology can help people work together in physically separate environments, but having people in the right frame of mind is equally important.

### 1. Clearly defined objectives and the decision-making process

Defining clear goals and setting an early baseline enables demonstration of achievable benefits in selling the programme to all teams. Disputes about process can be resolved by establishing a 'red route' decision-making process. Once on the red route, whilst the disagreement or problem persists, every 48 hours it moves up the management chain to be dealt with at a higher level; it tends to be sorted well before it reaches the chief executive's desk.

### 2. Risk register website

Health and safety policy should be universally applied across the whole commission. It is a good idea to have a live health and safety risk register on the project director's website which can be continually updated with the top ten risks and what is being done about them.

### 3. Visiting

Exchange visits by the teams to the main office, a site or a supplier's factory are crucial in getting people to understand how their contribution to the project fits into the programme. It makes people feel their work is acknowledged and they can be called upon to put in extra effort when required.

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#### 4. Looking after people's interests

Individual career development should be discussed with employees on a regular basis. Occasionally giving people the opportunity to take part in a decision-making process which is different from their normal working day prepares them for taking responsibility at a higher level.

#### 5. Reviewing Key Performance Indicators (KPI)

KPIs should be periodically reviewed. Instead of motivating teams, they may be demotivating them.

#### 6. Performance and reward

Everybody in a joint-venture project should be under the same performance regime. Project managers cannot expect people to work extra time or put in extra effort without suitable compensation. Celebrate both success, and occasions where people have tried but not succeeded.

#### 7. Virtual boards

When a project consists of a joint venture it is often advantageous to have a board of directors who do not manage the company, but handle the way it interfaces with other organisations within the same industry sector.

#### 8. Planning succession

Promoting a project manager out of a project after three or four years might be slightly disconcerting for the client, but it can enliven the whole team and give people opportunities for self-advancement.

## Analysis

The analysis of the proceedings looked at the wide variations in dispersed team working, various influences on how and where people work and how to achieve the right balance between technology, process and people.

Five important lessons concluded the seminar.

Dispersed project teams tend to work best where:

- The members of the team knew each other previously or have the time to get to know each other
- There is a shared background of knowledge and assumptions
- There is a common task focus and clear project identity
- There are robust procedures for planning, executing, monitoring and improving
- Technologies are used to support work, not for their own sake

## Participating organisations

Arup  
Atkins plc  
BAE Systems, Submarines  
Bechtel Ltd  
Bovis Lend Lease  
British Energy  
CMS Cameron McKenna LLP  
Department for Transport  
Electronic Data Services Ltd  
Emcor Rail Ltd  
Ernst & Young LLP  
Halcrow  
Immigration & Nationality Directorate  
Jacobs Baktie Group  
KBR  
Kellogg Brown & Root  
Laing Rail  
Major Projects Association  
Microsoft Ltd  
Mott MacDonald Group Ltd  
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Risk Solutions  
Rolls-Royce plc  
Said Business School, Oxford University  
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