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THE CHALLENGE

Collaborating with a far-flung team

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

Published Wednesday, Jan. 18, 2012 6:00AM EST

Last updated Wednesday, Jan. 18, 2012 1:29PM EST

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Every week, we will seek out expert advice to help a small or medium-sized company overcome a key issue it is facing in its business.

Alexey Saltykov is located in Toronto, his company co-founder is in Germany, two contract employees are in Russia, a third is in Montreal, and a business adviser is in Australia.

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Needless to say, working as a virtual team presents incredible challenges.

"I work from 8 a.m. to 12 a.m.," says Mr. Saltykov, the co-founder and [chief executive officer](#) of [InsureEye Inc.](#), a Toronto-based startup that helps consumers understand their insurance costs. "Russia is eight hours ahead and Germany is six hours ahead. There's not a lot of time to get together."

For Mr. Saltykov, living the life of the modern-day entrepreneur, brainstorming with colleagues around the world, is difficult. And he doesn't feel he's found the tools to make virtual collaboration really work.

Mr. Saltykov is often on [Skype](#) for video meetings and uses the Web-based collaboration software [Basecamp](#) to assign and comment on tasks. But he finds neither program is as collaborative or powerful as he'd like them to be, he says.

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Because everyone lives so far from each other, every instruction needs to be documented. He finds his current software isn't robust enough to do that.

And while Skype lets him talk to his developers or his business partners "face-to-face," it doesn't allow him to brainstorm ideas the way he'd like.

"I want to be able to stand up around the white board, chat together and discuss the problem," he says. "Nothing allows us to be as productive as people who are in one room."

Mr. Saltykov started his business last March, but to expand it, he'll need to find better ways to work with his overseas colleagues, he believes.

"We do try and talk every day," he says. "But we need to be more efficient."

The Challenge: How can InsureEye improve the collaboration among its far-away staff?

THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

Mitchell Potter, Principal with Minneapolis-based Mercer LLC

I think he should actually do away with the Skype or other tools that provide a visual of the other people. Those are useful for personal conversations, but they don't add value in most business group or brainstorming conversations. In fact, they can be distracting. They are not a good substitute for real body language, but you keep trying to make the visual image work as well as the real thing.

Better to be voice-only. Voice-only also relieves everyone of having to dress for the call. One of the great advantages of telecommuting is that you can focus on what you are doing and not on how you look or how the way you look may affect others.

Supplement your conversations with some form of interactive discussion software. There are many, good brainstorming tools he can buy, like [Jive](#), [Moxie](#), [and] [Telligent](#). Many of these paid tools have (elements) specifically designed for brainstorming.

Ann-Marie Urquhart, Toronto-based associate director of global IT services at Ernst & Young

For brainstorming, on-line meeting software, such as [GoToMeeting](#), is one way for all participants to see, in real time, slides and documented discussions during the meeting. Participants, at any time, can share their screen's content to the entire team.

He might want to consider engaging a project manager to create a project's plan and manage all the tasks – rather than doing it himself or relying only on software. This might help enable the CEO to focus more on strategy.

Finally, the actual time of the meeting should also be taken into consideration, respecting the different time zones and country-specific holidays. If every team member is expected to attend the call, then the meetings should be rotated so the 'pain' is shared equally.

Simon Bell, Cardiff-based co-founder and chief operating officer of Toronto-based LOGiQ3. His business partner is based in Toronto

We've tried Skype, but it wasn't great for the quick conversation. Instead, we use [Epik Networks](#), a company that offers voice over Internet protocol (VOIP). Whether we're in Toronto or Cardiff, we have a phone that's connected to the Internet that I just pick it up and it connects one office to the other. We don't incur any long- distance charges.

We've also spent years testing differing desktop-sharing tools. We needed to be able to see the same document at the same time and make a single set of changes. We found that in [Join Me](#), which is a simple, secure way to instantly get someone else's input wherever they are. It's free too.

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Use BlackBerry Messenger for keeping in touch in quick messages. It's secure, free and you can tell when the other person has received and read the message. [iPhone's new iMessage program operates in a similar way.]

THREE THINGS INSUREYE SHOULD DO NOW

Use the phone more

Video conferencing is often distracting and the visuals can take away from accomplishing tasks. Make conference calls, or get a VOIP phone that's only for calling team members.

Hire a project manager

Hire someone to manage the multitude of tasks. The CEO can then think more about strategy than inputting every detail of a conversation into a software program.

Rotate time zones

Change the times of conference calls every day or week, so people "share the pain" of having to get up early or go to bed late.

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