

Open

on the

Open Road



The background of the entire page is a photograph of a desert landscape. A dirt road winds through the middle ground, leading towards a distant horizon under a hazy, orange-tinted sky. The foreground is a dark, textured surface, possibly asphalt or gravel. Overlaid on the left side of the image is the text '10 times' in a large, bold, sans-serif font. The letters have a grainy, textured appearance, similar to concrete or stone. The '10' is positioned higher than the word 'times'.

# 10 times

With proper planning, virtual teams can steer around common communication obstacles.

BY AMY MERRICK ■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTIN GEE

# road



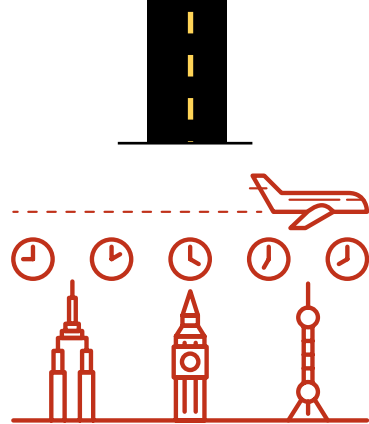


Project managers are on the move. Frequent travel between teams and to project sites means project practitioners must often communicate remotely. But virtual communication can come with very real roadblocks: team members working in different time zones, schedules gradually spiraling out of control, requests slipping through the cracks.

With the rise in business travel, those problems will become only more pressing. In 2013, global business travel spending increased by 5.4 percent from the previous year, according to a report by the Global Business Travel Association. That trend will continue over the next several years, with business travel expected to increase by more than 8 percent in 2014, the report says.

Here, project practitioners share their hard-won advice for seamless communication on the road.





## Roadblock: Time Zones

The client is in China, the project manager has a meeting in the United States, the rest of the project team is based in England—and they all have to get on the phone.

Kummar Vaalsalam, PMP, spends 30 to 40 percent of his time on the road. Meanwhile, his consultants and managers may be in North America or Europe visiting customers. When there's a scheduled call that results in very early mornings or late nights for stakeholders and team members, he first makes a judgment about the phone call: Does it warrant the inconvenience, or can it be handled via email? "We make sure the call is well worth the stretch," says Mr. Vaalsalam, a Mumbai, India-based delivery director for Asia Pacific and the Middle East for IT services at Hexaware Technologies.

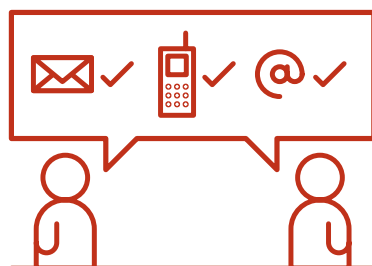
If the call is deemed worth it, then prior to the conversation, he sends an agenda that explains its priority and purpose. The agenda indicates the decisions that need to be made as well as the team members responsible for each action. "This gives the 'what is in it for me' angle," he says.

With mobile members on the go, project managers have to handle not just different time zones but changing ones. To clarify who's where and when, Greg Mester, PMI-ACP, PMP, makes sure all team members synchronize their calendars so they all know each person's time zone and availability on a particular day. He also uses instant-messaging or chat software that shows who is at their computers. "This allows everyone to know if someone is in, and then they can chat or call to discuss thoughts or questions," says Mr. Mester, program and agile projects manager in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA for Worldgate LLC.



**A pre-call agenda  
"gives the 'what is  
in it for me' angle."**

—Kummar Vaalsalam, PMP, Hexaware Technologies, Mumbai, India



## Roadblock: Schedule Drift

When project managers are on the road, it's tougher to ensure that everyone on the team stays on task and on schedule. Fernando Guardiola Alvarez, PMP, arranges two types of virtual check-in meetings while traveling. For a quick project review, his team sends him a progress report and then spends 20 to 30 minutes on a conference call. When necessary, dedicated discussions can require calls of 60 to 90 minutes, says Mr. Guardiola, customer project manager in Santiago, Chile with Ericsson, a PMI Global Executive Council member.

Mr. Vaalsalam likewise keeps his remote team on schedule by relying on a one-two punch: His team members have a lengthy summary call once a week; for any fast decisions, they use social media or instant-messaging applications on their smartphones.

Ashish Sharma, PMP, who has managed teams in India, the Philippines, Latin America and the United States, trusts his virtual team members to keep him apprised of their progress—and intervenes only when needed. "Unless we're dealing with a crisis situation, it is expected that team members are conscientious enough to report on their progress and keep me copied on emails," says Mr. Sharma, project management contractor at Visa in Foster City, California, USA. "If there is a team member who needs more oversight, I will set up time slots for catch-up or delegate that responsibility to someone else."



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—Ashish Sharma, PMP, Visa, Foster City, California, USA



## Roadblock: Dead Zones

Even the most experienced travelers hit mobile-phone dead zones, where they struggle to find a wireless Internet connection. Before that happens, project managers can ensure their projects will continue to run smoothly by developing backup plans.

When Mr. Sharma hosts a virtual meeting while on the road, he designates someone as the alternate host, a feature available on most web meeting platforms. "If you end up dropping off accidentally, the meeting simply switches over to your alternate host," he says.

Because even portable wireless hot spots aren't foolproof, no team should assume its manager will be constantly accessible, says Atul Gaur, project manager in the Pune, India office of Alfa Laval (India) Ltd., an industrial-engineering firm. "It is really not necessary to be in touch with everyone 24/7," Mr. Gaur says. He plans for dropped connections in advance: Well before traveling to remote areas, he communicates any urgent messages to his team.

On the other hand, being unreachable for a few hours can be a help rather than a hindrance. "I actually enjoy my dead zones because they provide me a chance to clear my head or think about the future," Mr. Mester says. "Dead zones are perfect places to pull your head out of the day-to-day stuff and work on planning and growth."



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—Greg Mester, PMI-ACP, PMP,  
Worldgate LLC, Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania, USA



## Roadblock: Inaccessible Files

Valerio Crovasce, PMP, oversees assembly lines that make mining equipment, airplanes and other commercial vehicles. His business unit has operations in North and South America, Europe and Asia, and he spends at least one week per month traveling.

"More and more, we have projects that are not performed in a single region," says Mr. Crovasce, global project and site management director in Southfield, Michigan, USA for Comau Adaptive Solutions, a unit of Italian industrial-automation company Comau. A team might complete 3-D engineering in the United States, 2-D engineering and manufacturing in Argentina, and installation in Brazil.

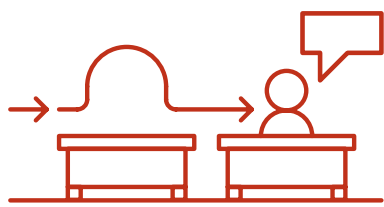
To avoid the confusion that comes with multiple rounds of emails, Mr. Crovasce relies on file-sharing software to keep documents updated and accessible by any team member. Mr. Vaalsalam sets his shared files by default to version control, which tracks changes so that everyone has the most up-to-date information.

When the roadblocks of inaccessible files and dead zones meet up, Mr. Guardiola goes back to basics. "For places where you expect connection problems, old friends such as the memory card or USB [Universal Serial Bus] stick are the solution," he says.



**"For places where you expect connection problems, old friends such as the memory card or USB stick are the solution."**

—Fernando Guardiola Alvarez, PMP,  
Ericsson, Santiago, Chile



## Roadblock: Missed Requests

When all project requests go through a single project manager, his or her travel can result in bottlenecks. Decide ahead of time who else can assume responsibility. “Create a clear escalation path internal to the organization,” Mr. Sharma says. “Make sure you let people know whom they can reach out to in your absence for questions that can be handled by someone else.” Before he takes off, Mr. Sharma lets his team know the periods of time when he’ll be available to read emails and take calls—and the times when he’ll be out of touch.

Mr. Gaur includes the contact information for his second-in-command in his out-of-office email reply. Before hitting the road, he also calls important project stakeholders, updates them on pending issues and gives them the contact details for someone who can be easily reached.

When Mr. Crovasce travels in China, he sometimes gets calls in the middle of the night from team members who forget he’s away from home. However, “it’s not feasible for me to be awake 24 hours a day,” he says. “I wouldn’t be very effective.” So he designates a project management director in each region who can support project teams in their day-to-day activities. Once a week, he speaks with those regional managers at a set time.

Project managers can’t avoid every communication roadblock while traveling—they need to build time into their schedules for the inevitable bumps. But by anticipating and planning for predictable obstacles, project practitioners can ensure the virtual roadway is as smooth as possible. **PM**

**“Create a clear escalation path internal to the organization.”**

—Ashish Sharma, PMP

## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Email is fast, convenient and unavoidable. But because it lacks the physical cues people use to convey meaning, this flat form of communication also often leads to misunderstandings that can quickly escalate. Still, it is possible to recover.

Valerio Crovasce, PMP, recalls one of his project managers firing off a pointed email to the managing director of his company’s office in a different region. “The email was a little bit strong in the way he was complaining of the support he was getting from the team there,” says Mr. Crovasce, Comau Adaptive Solutions, Southfield, Michigan, USA. Though Mr. Crovasce didn’t see the original email, he was copied on the angry reply—as was his boss.

His response: Get the conversation offline, and fast. Mr. Crovasce scheduled a phone call to address the topic more respectfully. “We managed to solve the issue by talking rather than writing emails,” he says.

Better yet, edit team members’ most important emails before they’re sent. Kummar Vaalsalam, PMP, caught an email draft from a team member just in time. It told a customer that the development team would not prepare an operations manual or program specification documents “as it is not in our scope.” Its tone wasn’t particularly diplomatic.

Once he realized the client already had

an operations manual in another form, Mr. Vaalsalam reworded the email to politely point this out and to add that the team would be happy to fill in any gaps—satisfying the customer.

The stresses of travel can compound misunderstandings. “While traveling, things can be hectic, so I try not to send emails on controversial items,” says Greg Mester, PMI-ACP, PMP, Worldgate LLC, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. And when e-communication hits a snag, he too takes the conversation offline. “If an email does mess things up, I usually make a call as soon as the email traffic starts picking up in a bad way.”

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