



Working across time zones

All global or multi-national organisations seem to suffer from one common complaint – the late night phone conference.

Once attendees are required from 3 or more time zones it seems impossible to choose a time that suits everyone – someone is always either up late or early.

While there seems to be no single magic solution to this problem, set out below are some “best practice” suggestions we recently collected on this subject for one of our clients.

1. Share the load

The most common suggestion was some sort of rotation of timing (maybe not equal if most people are in one time zone) so that it is not always one area that gets the poor timing. In particular it should not be arranged to suit “head office” or “the boss” on all occasions.

Related suggestions included

- Some countries will have a preference for late or early starts. It was noted that in most Asian countries a late start was preferred and it may even be sensible to have one or two “late days” where key people started and finished late so they could participate in a regular phone call.
- Another suggestion was that where 2 or 3 people from the same office might be on a call that they have only one person attend and that person represents the others and briefs them on what went on.

2. Make it as easy as possible and remember to say thanks!

- Simply recognising those who have the poor time frame when it happens and thanking them for attending is a good idea.
- Allowing sensible flexibility to work from home or come in late when there is a major phone conference in the middle of the night.
- Ensuring that people have adequate international telephone and internet bandwidth access at home may be required.

3. Efficient Meetings

Meeting Planning

- An agenda which clearly sets out the issues and distinguishes between For Discussion items (I can afford to listen to a recording later on) and For Decision items (I need to be present when it is happening) is important.
- Clustering For Decision items together at the most convenient time so people can ensure they are present.
- Good papers supporting major issues distributed at least 24 hours before the call so people can read them beforehand and give their views by writing or briefing someone who can attend.
- Meeting Protocols (which are enforced) about timeliness, identifying who is speaking, etc
- A timekeeper role to ensure meetings stay on time

People can leave

- It is usually impolite to leave a meeting – the “rules” should be explicitly changed to “If I think I can leave then I can and that will not offend anyone”.

4. Technical Solutions

As well as telephone service solutions through Skype and major telecom providers in various countries there are a number of new technologies that can assist in the process e.g.

- Where a presentation or other material needs to be discussed on-line conferencing tools like “Go to Meeting” and similar assist in keeping the same information in front of everyone
- Recording of phone conferences so people can listen to For Information pieces later on
- Facebook or similar sites to keep information and recordings on