

# X&Y PARTNERS

Straight answers for emerging issues

Insights on building and managing  
virtual teams

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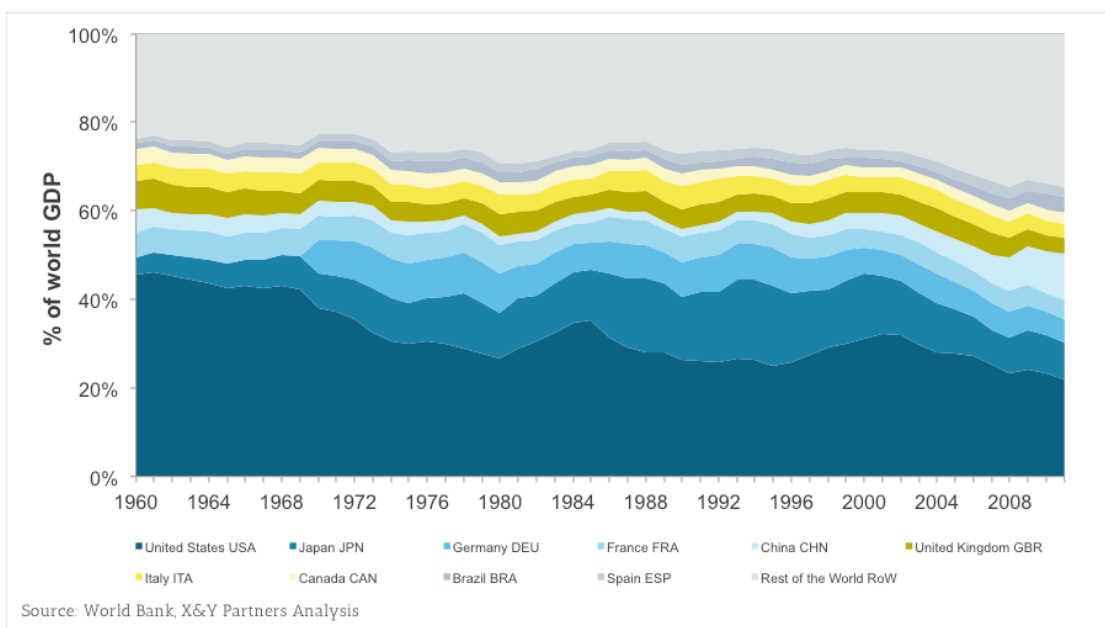
# Insights on building and managing virtual teams

## Seven tips to facilitate the management of geographically dispersed teams.

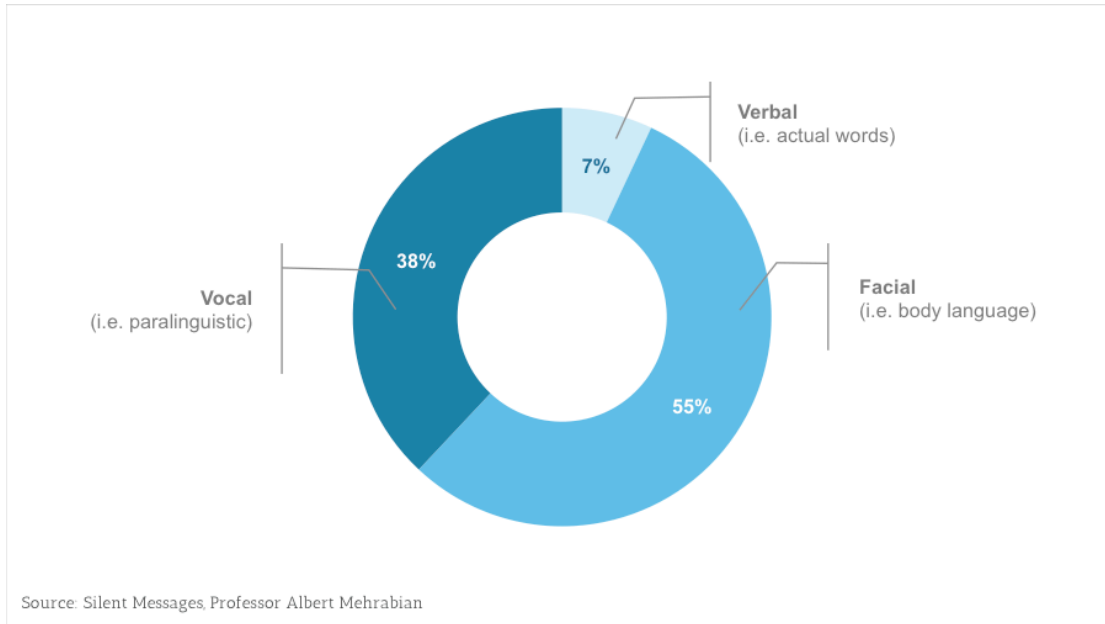
The last decades have been fertile in producing an increasingly globalized world. Our network of friends is spread all over the globe. Facebook, Skype, Youtube, and countless other tools help us to stay connected. The work environment is no different: If you work for a large organization, you probably find yourself dealing with colleagues from other countries on a daily basis. If you work for a smaller local company, chances are that at some point you will end up working together with remote business partners. As economic activity becomes more and more dispersed (Exhibit 1), working with

geographically dispersed teams becomes more and more commonplace. In this article we share seven suggestions to facilitate the management of these virtual teams.

Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer in communication research, stated that, when communicating feelings and attitudes, only 7% of what we say is conveyed by actual words: the remaining 93% is body language, volume and tone (Exhibit 2). This is particularly relevant for virtual teams, which are forced to communicate via channels that do not convey body language and paralinguistic characteristics well (e.g. telephone, email). This issue is often aggravated by other factors, such as misaligned



**Exhibit 1** – Evolution of the world GDP distribution for the 1960-2010 period, showing an increased dispersion



*Exhibit 2 – The Mehrabian equation provides insights on the weight that verbal, vocal and facial elements have on communication*

objectives and lack of team bonding, trust or group identity.

At X&Y Partners we often manage or integrate virtual teams, so we tend to deal with these issues on a daily basis. Here is what we have learned in the process:

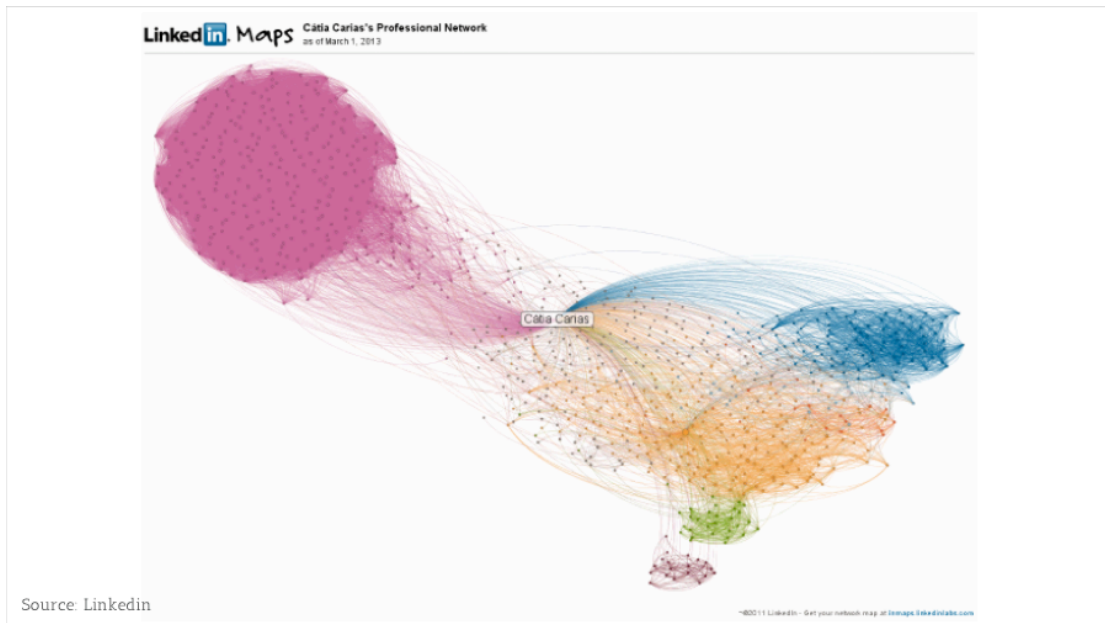
### 1. Get to know everyone

Whether you are involved in a one-week proposal or a multi-year assignment, it is important to get to know who is on the other end of the calls and email exchanges. This will make working together easier and more fluid, while strengthening your professional network, which is something invaluable in doing business today (Exhibit 3). So take the time to listen and learn things about your virtual co-workers. You will not

have the coffee machine to stand by and chat, but this is still a vital part of your working together routine. Promote an individual introduction at the beginning of the assignment, focusing both on professional and personal details. Make sure to check on everyone at the beginning of each call. See if there are any common interests around the “table” and chitchat a bit about that. In short, create bonds.

### 2. Keep everyone in the loop

Trust is key for establishing solid business relationships and a good working environment. Trust is often supported by a free flow of unbiased information, which is something harder to manage with virtual teams. One possible solution lies in collaborative



**Exhibit 3** – Graphical representation of my professional LinkedIn network. Lines are connections and the different colors highlight different networks (e.g., university, companies where I worked before, friends)

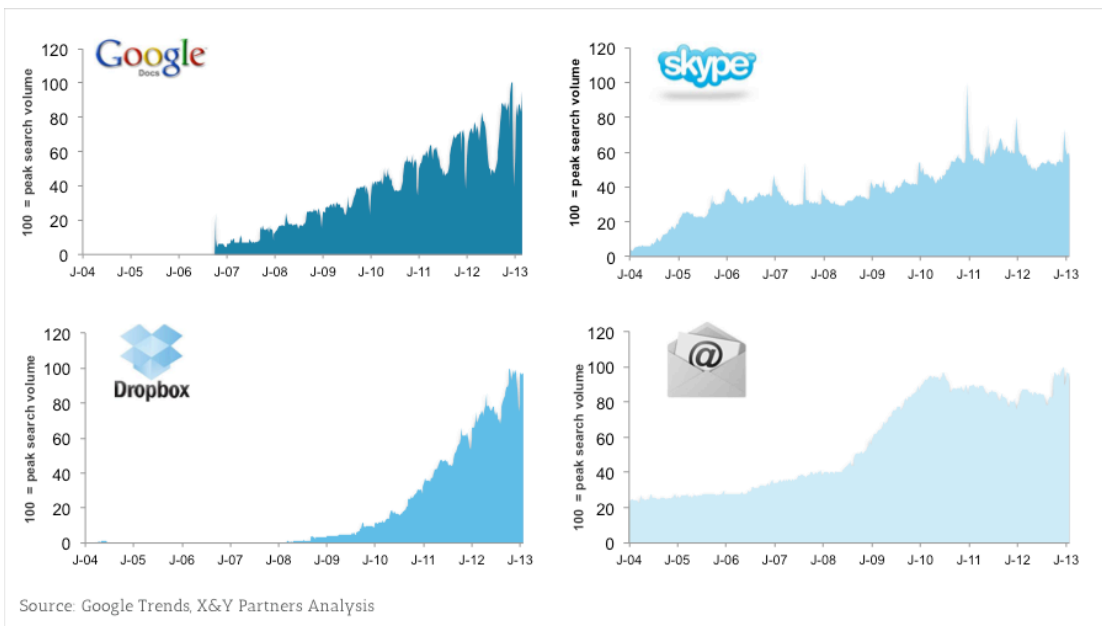
tools. For instance, you can use Dropbox to share the latest versions of the documents, Google Docs to keep track of tasks, and Skype to speak whenever necessary (Exhibit 4), making sure that everyone is always at the same page. Scheduling periodic team calls is also important. Even if there is not much to be discussed, this helps keeping the pace of the project and fosters a collaborative environment. Lastly, do not forget to prepare and distribute clear and actionable minutes after each call.

### 3. Clearly allocate responsibilities

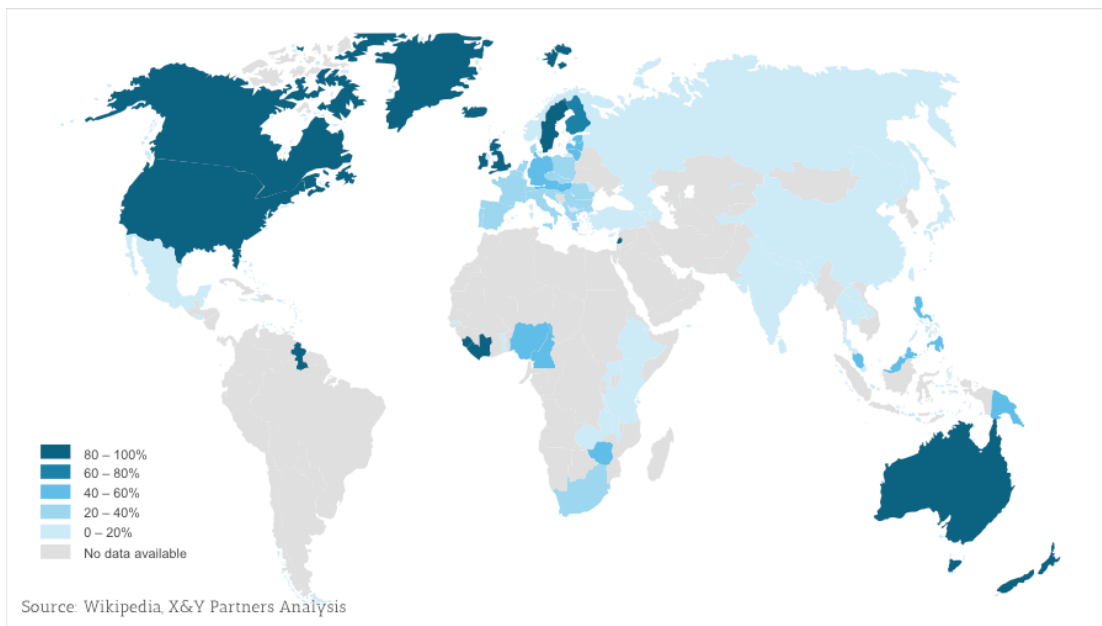
Clearly allocating responsibilities is crucial for the success of any project, even more so when dealing with a virtual team. As a team manager it is your responsibility to structure the

project, define milestones, make sure that all the tasks are properly allocated, and confirm that everyone has a common understanding on what needs to be done, and by when. Using tasks trackers (which can range from a simple spreadsheet with the tasks and deadlines of each team member, to more sophisticated tools such as Microsoft Project) is a good way to make sure everything is running according to plan.

It is also important not to overrate teamwork. Structural issues need to be worked out by the whole team, but smaller decisions are often more efficiently dealt with individually or in smaller groups. In other words, you should not create a working structure



**Exhibit 4** – Collaborative tools such as Google Docs, Skype and Dropbox, together with the venerable email, are becoming increasingly more popular



**Exhibit 5** – Percentage of English speakers by country

where the need for group consensus becomes counterproductive.

**4. Discuss controversial issues first**

Postponing potentially controversial discussions happens more often than one likes to admit. There is usually a

latent expectation that things will resolve themselves, but that is seldom the case. More often than not, you will end up under pressure to solve something that could have been dealt with more efficiently at the early stages of the project. Furthermore, discussing

early on potentially controversial issues also sets up a tone of trust and openness.

### 5. Address language barriers

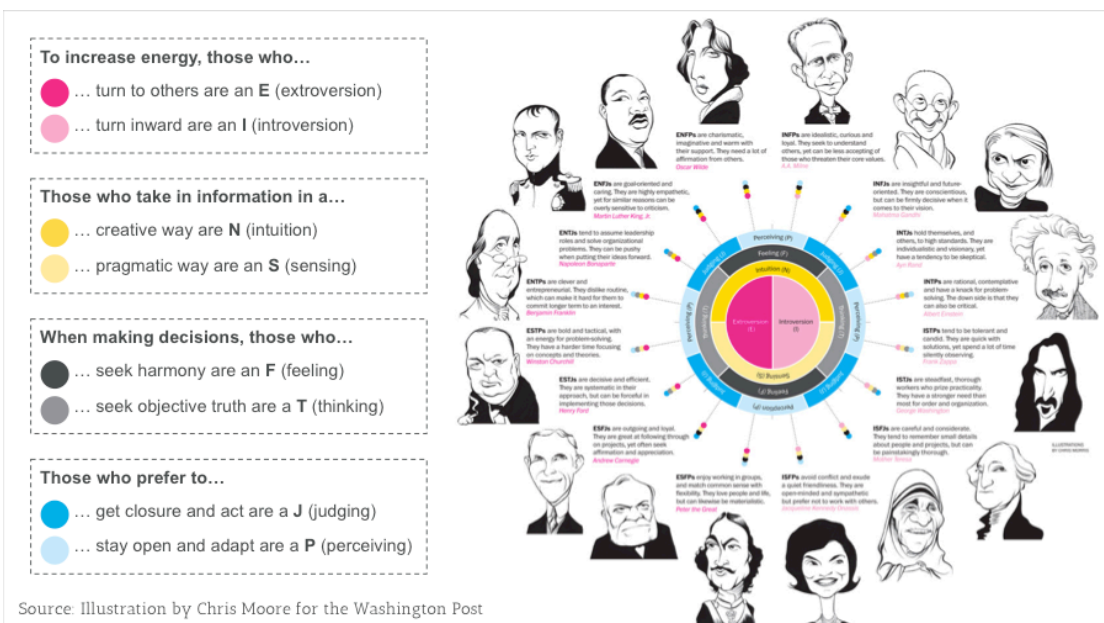
It is quite common to have people from different nationalities in the same assignment, and although English is currently the *lingua franca*, it is not the native language for the majority of us (Exhibit 5). Expressing yourself in a foreign language can be challenging, and can even inhibit people from participating and contributing. It is important to guarantee that everyone has a chance to express his or her opinion, thus preventing native speakers from dominating the discussion. However, you should not bully someone into the discussion. Instead, if you feel that someone is utterly unwilling to participate due to language barriers, try to ask for some

written notes, as it is often easier to write opinions than to present them to an audience.

You should also avoid parallel discussions in a language that not all of the team members speak, as this undermines trust and is considered rude in many cultures.

### 6. Be diplomatic

We all respond differently to a particular situation, depending on our individual personality traits. In a face-to-face meeting, it is fairly easy to spot discomfort or uneasiness, but in virtual teams this is a harder thing to do. On top of regular team calls, it is often a good idea to have individual quick chats with each team member, to ensure that there are no hidden issues that can escalate later on. For longer-term assignments, it may be



Source: Illustration by Chris Moore for the Washington Post

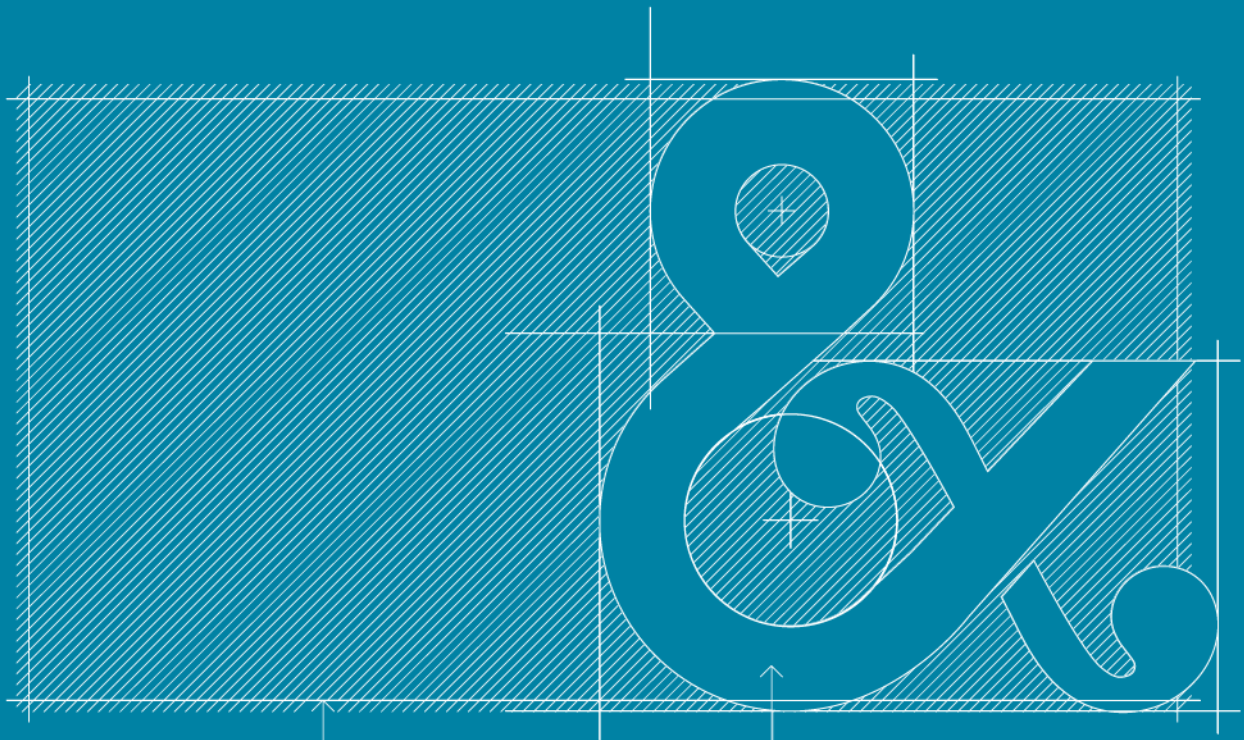
**Exhibit 6** – The Meyers-Briggs Type (MBTI) is an indicator of how people perceive the world and make decisions

worthwhile to assess personalities (with a Meyers-Briggs test, for instance – Exhibit 6) and use the results as a guidance to tailor your approach.

### **7. Wrap-up and give feedback**

At the end of each interaction and particularly at the end of the assignment, always wrap-up the

discussion and provide feedback. Besides general feedback to the whole team, you may also want to give personal feedback to each of the team members. As we discuss [here](#), feedback is not about pointing fingers, but rather an opportunity to discuss what worked well and what can be improved for the next assignment.



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