

## Best Practice Interview: Never met in person, but still an effective team!

*"We cannot meet physically, but we can be together happily."*



Working from home, at different sites or across different time zones is challenging and very new for most of us. The Leadership & Organizational Development Team shows how being a geographically dispersed can still work effectively. They are working in different regions and have never met in person, but they are still a productive and close-knit team with a great team spirit. Before the coronavirus crisis the Corporate Communications team had the chance to talk to them and learn more about their tips, tricks and best practices for working as a remote team.

The team consists of Julie Friend (Director for Global Leadership and Organizational Development, based in the UK), Katleen van Houdenhove (Leadership & Organizational Development Senior Manager, based in Germany with responsibility for the EMEA region), Anna Cheng (Leadership & Organizational Development Manager, based in Hong Kong with responsibility for the APAC region) and Jeannie Bracken (Leadership & Organizational Development Senior Manager, based in the U.S. with responsibility for the American region).

In the following interview they share some of their experiences and tips as well as some challenges they face and how they counter those.

### 1. How is working in different countries and time zones?

**All:** Sometimes we feel like we are a team working in a shift model. If there is a project coming up which must be done very quickly, we are able to do so. That is the advantage of a well-organized team working across the different time zones. During a 24-hour working day, at least one of us will be in the office for most of the time.

### 2. What challenges are you facing and how do you overcome them?

**All:** Our biggest challenge is, because of the time zones, finding free times that we can really talk or virtually meet. Each of us leads some big tasks and all team members work collaboratively on these tasks. We use these times to get into the expectations and understand what everyone's going to be working on. This is of course only feasible due to the ability of everyone to have a degree of discipline. Each member of the team needs to be very willing to cooperate, as we are dependent on the individual attitudes to be a good team. It's not something that happens without purposeful action.

**Katleen:** We need to be very effective during our weekly team meetings. We have an agenda which is distributed before the meeting and we try to stick to it. Sometimes you really need discussions, which are more than just 60 or 90 minutes and that can be quite frustrating when we do not have this possibility.

**Anna:** If not everyone can make the meeting, we record the meetings and let anyone who missed that meeting to listen to the recording in her daytime. We recognize and embrace our differences in culture, strengths and work style. We are open to share and learn different cultures and what's happening in different locations. Also, we are open to different thoughts and insights which inspire me to look at things differently and broadly. Despite how different we are, we always get aligned to work towards our team goals.

**Jeannie:** I think the best way to counter that is for someone to take the time to reflect on how they work and what it's going to mean working on a remote team, because it is very different. And to establish a discipline, whether that means everything from getting up at a certain time or being available at a certain time.

### **3. How do you communicate with your colleagues on a day-to-day basis?\***

**All:** Microsoft Teams is our day-to-day communication platform. Besides, we also use email, Skype and WhatsApp. We used more emails in the past and we found out that it's just not so effective, because it's a back and forward of sending emails and copying people in. Skype is our platform for having meetings. Also, a small tip to build a relationship in the team - we always have our cameras on when we do Skype sessions, which from my perspective makes a big difference in order to build a team spirit.

### **4. How can you have a successful and productive team across time zones?**

**All:** Being clear on roles and responsibilities, about expectations and what something takes to be successful is very important. We share our work in progress, what we are going to do, why we are doing it and possible ideas, proactively via different platforms. We ask for feedback and support actively. Apart from the weekly team meetings and weekly 1:1s with Julie, we invite one another to 1:1s whenever we see the need to communicate more and seek support or feedback.

**Jeannie:** We're very purposeful about what we do. We each represent different cultures in different parts of the organization, and so we really talk through how to have a global solution. In addition to that, we are very open to different ideas. I may come into a project with some preconceived ideas, but I am very open to other contributions, because I know it's not possible for me to think through everything. I think that is required of any kind of a team, particularly a global team like this, to be very open to other contributions and the value that other opinions can really bring.

**Anna:** We always recognize teammates' efforts and provide timely and constructive feedback. We combine our strengths and efforts, at the same time, we inspire one another to do more and be better. We take turns to conduct a monthly sharing and learning session of the topics which are related to our job roles like learning culture in an organization, coaching tools, leading self, etc. We look at what can be done more than what cannot be done. We discuss about ideas more than problems. This mindset allows us to be more agile and resilient, have a greater innovation capacity and learn through changes.

**To be continued – Part 2 of the interview will be available soon.**

*\*Editor's note: The interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 crisis*

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