Team Dispersal

Some shaping ideas

The storyline is how distributed teams can be a liability or an asset – or anything in between. It isn’t simply a case of neutralizing the ‘down side’

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Acknowledgements

• “How to Manage Virtual Teams”
  – http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-manage-virtual-teams/

• “A Surprising Truth About Geographically Dispersed Teams”
Cautionary Preface…

The challenge of Agility is not usually around skills, innate inability or the wrong people…
• If you have the wrong people it won’t matter whether you do agile, waterfall or snake charming

…It is in creating the conditions for self-organising teams to thrive
• i.e. allow Innovation, passion, creativity, initiative, drive to emerge from people
• Enable people to want to delight customers and stakeholders

If you are in an environment where the team gets to decide ‘everything’, you are at a distinct advantage

Most of us however are in enterprises and/or complex/large environments where that decentralized full empowerment isn’t available
Today’s IT worker…

…Needs to be a Problem Solver for the Business

- Not solely an analyst, a coder, a tester, a designer, an architect etc etc
- Some, many or all of these things at the same time
- “Generalising specialists”

Today, much problem solving is performed by teams, rather than individuals

- Provides an interesting basis for thinking about agile teams… and hence collocation
- The complexity of these problems has exceeded the cognitive capacity of any individual and requires a team of members to solve them.
- The success of solving these complex problems not only relies on individual team members who possess different but complementary expertise, but more importantly, their collective problem solving ability.
Factors and Study Results
Potential Inhibitors

- Personalities
- Time Zone
- Organisational
  - Siloes, Hierarchy
- Cultural
  - Values
- Technology
- Language
Challenges for Distributed Teams

- Difficulties in communication and coordination
- Reduced trust
- Increased inability to establish a common ground.
- Proximity tends to promote
  - more frequent communication
  - development of closer and more positive interpersonal relationships.
    - Regular physical presence of co-workers improves people’s feelings of familiarity and fondness,
    - Frequent informal interactions serve to strengthen social ties.
- Physical distance decreases closeness and affinity
  - leads to a greater potential for conflict
  - interpersonal differences are a greater threat to the team’s social stability because of the greater difficulty in resolving conflicts across geographic boundaries
  - Distance also brings with it other issues, such as team members having to negotiate multiple time zones and requiring them to reorganize their workdays to accommodate others’ schedules
Potential Advantages of Distribution

• Virtual teams tend to incorporate higher levels of:
  – structural diversity
    – team members from multiple locations associated with different business units and reporting to different managers
  – demographic diversity

• Both types of diversity can be highly valuable for teams
  – Exposes members to heterogeneous sources of work experience, feedback and networking opportunities.
  – In addition, virtual team members are often diverse in nationality.
    – Although such diversity may complicate team dynamics, it can also enhance the overall problem-solving capacity of the group by bringing more vantage points to bear

• People are more creative when they enjoy privacy and freedom from interruption
Team processes can be classified into two categories:
– task-related including those that help ensure each member is contributing fully
– socio-emotional including those that increase the cohesion of the group

Findings:
• Processes that are directly task-related are the most critical for the performance of dispersed teams
• Virtual teams that had processes that increased the levels of mutual support, member effort, work coordination, balance of member contributions and task-related communications consistently outperformed other teams
  – Moreover, such dispersed teams were able to outperform collocated teams with similar levels of those same processes.
• So, dispersion is not necessarily detrimental but depends on the quality of a team’s task-related processes.
• Nonetheless, dispersion carries significant risks: Those teams with poor task-related processes suffered heavily with increased dispersion
The Importance Of Task-related Processes

- High
- Team Performance
- Effectiveness
- Efficiency
- Low

Dispersion:
- Same Floor
- Same Building
- Same Site
- Same City
- Same Country
- Same Continent
- Different Continent
Be careful… Paradoxical Findings?

- Sometimes teams in the same building but on different floors perform poorly
  - Perhaps they consider themselves collocated and fail to take precautionary process steps

- Sometimes teams in the same room perform poorly
  - They might be using e-tools instead of communicating face to face
  - They might not actually be sitting together

- One (other) study seemed to show that having one person not collocated with the rest of the team improved the team
  - Perhaps it just made those teams sharpen up on socio-emotional and task-based processes (rather than there being something in having one team member remote)?
Balance

Consider

- “introverts are comfortable working alone — and solitude is a catalyst to innovation”

versus...

- “solving complex problems not only relies on individual team members [...] but more importantly, their collective problem solving ability”

Suggestion: We need to work altogether on a problem but not in a group brainstorming way

Puzzle: so how does pair programming fit?
Tips (from the study)

• **Emphasize teamwork skills**
  – Whilst socio-economic factors won’t differentiate teams, they are necessary prerequisite

• **Promote self-leadership across the team**
  – Self-organising

• **Provide for face-to-face meetings**
  – Periodically. Maybe not frequently
  – SAFe provides a 3-monthly cadence perfect for this

• **Foster a “global culture”**
  – “Go see…” abroad
Mitigating Factors (other tips)

• Shared and big-picture platforms e.g. Rally
  – Especially collaborative tools like FlowDock
• Time shifting
  – Align working hours across time zones
• Scatter time
  – c.f. nursing split shifts
• Follow-the-sun workflow
  – But don’t go back to waterfall fragments and siloes!
• Non-violent communication
  – Openness, Transparency, Honesty (agile values)
  – Build conditions for motivation, trust
  – Create teams and supra-teams with a common purpose
Rally Insights

- Evidence Found:
  - Teams distributed within the same time zone have up to 25% better productivity (e.g. 2 cf 1)
  - Being in the same time zone outperformed being physically co-located (e.g. 2 cf 1).
    - Is distraction a problem? Or do distributed teams take active steps?
  - Both far outperformed being distributed with over 3 hour difference (offshore model). E.g. Compare 3 with 1 and 2
Advice and Tips
Distributed Teams are Common

• **Accept and embrace this reality**
  – It may even become an advantage

• **Minimise randomness**
  – Many teams are distributed simply because of that’s the way they evolved or got set up
  – Vagaries of personnel availability based on skill sets rather than geography etc.

• **Maximise strengths**
  – Mixed perspectives, ‘triangulating’

• **Reduce inter-team coupling, increase cohesion**

• **Try different things out**: failure is okay as long as you learn from it and alter your subsequent path
Good Ways to Split Teams

Sets of teams with common goals
- Increase the socio-emotional factors
- especially when scaling (program and portfolio agility)
- Wider team coordination
- centralise where necessary, decentralise where not

Equal contributors

Self-contained and independent function (low-coupling, high cohesion)

Organise for stability and for the long-term

Units of cross-functionality

Shared hardware resources (...?)
Bad Ways to Split Teams

Imbalances, e.g…

- Leadership and creative ideas vs. Programmers and testers

Large time zone differences

- US -7 to China +8 hours as an example

OFTEN!

- Require medium/long-term stability
Simple Practices

Reinforce the discipline of event timings (stand-up, planning, demo, retro etc)
  - Maintain the regular heartbeat

Sharing tools for code, configuration
  - Wikis, sharepoint etc etc
  - Visible to all and shared

Share activities across locations
  - Pair activities such as programming, design review etc
  - Even if not working on the same thing

Whole Team Daily Stand-ups: use video/voice e.g. WebEx, hangouts

Chat rooms etc e.g. Flowdock

Meet face to face often
  - At the very least, one every 2-3 months

WebCam or better to share other team areas

One team sprint planning, demo and retrospectives

Worst case: linking ScrumMaster(s)
Conclusion: Inconclusive Evidence 😊

“Dispersed teams can actually outperform groups that are collocated. To succeed, however, virtual collaboration must be managed in specific ways.”
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Go Agile. Go Rally.