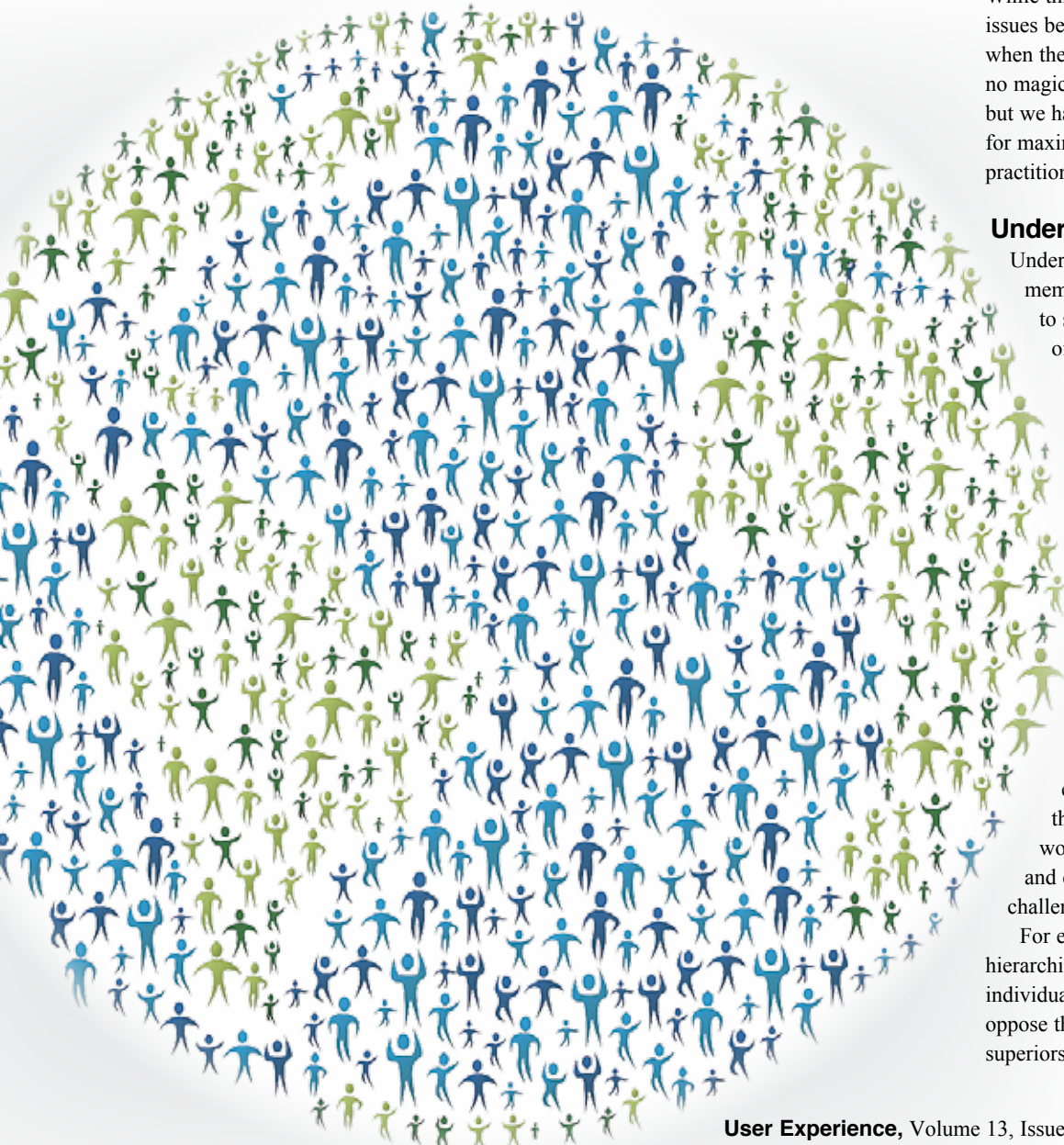# Global Design Teams

Best Practices for Maximizing Effectiveness

By Jhilmil Jain and Catherine Courage

User experience is still a relatively new discipline, and many companies don't have clear career paths for professionals in the field. UX practitioners come from a variety of backgrounds, such as architecture, psychology, and human-computer interaction (HCI), to name a few. The UX discipline is very collaborative, and we often act as the glue between project management, sales, marketing, engineering, and business development.

UX is a creative and subjective field. Sometimes it feels like everyone in the company thinks they can do our job. Our work is often judged by people who are not in UX and thus don't understand the diversity and subjectivity of the field. User experience managers need to recognize this and make sure they define criteria for measuring success. While this applies to UX in general, these issues become exponentially more challenging when the team is distributed globally. There is no magic formula to address all these issues, but we have uncovered some best practices for maximizing global UX which should help practitioners work more effectively.

Understand the Culture

Understanding the cultures of the team members you are working with is critical to success. It's best to take the approach of learning about and appreciating other cultures' work styles. Expecting people to conform to your norm will certainly result in difficulties.

Some cultures value consensus-driven decision making, while others expect command-and-control-style direction. Since design is largely a decision making process, you need to account for cultural differences that impact team dynamics. The larger and more distributed the team, the more important it is to identify objective metrics of success and get everyone to internalize the value of these metrics. Doing so will facilitate working together toward the same goals, and cultural perspectives will be less challenging.

For example, Brazil and Korea are hierarchically driven. In design reviews, individuals from these countries will never oppose the viewpoint of their managers or superiors, even if they disagree with them. To

work around this problem, we meet designer to designer at a peer level and encourage comfortable expression of individual perspectives.

Countries like India, China, South Korea, and Brazil value personal relationships over projects. When working with folks from these countries, make an effort to get to know them on a personal level and to build relationships. Doing so will take you a long way.

Recently, one of the authors of this article was in Seoul, where she allocated one day to get to know the team and the culture. The group ate local food together and the author went singing with the team (a very popular

preferred working styles of co-workers and to obtain tips on how to communicate when styles differ. Taking the assessments can also be a fun way to get to know the people you work with.

Building bonds early will allow team members to go back to their own corner of the world with a clear understanding of their colleagues and the project(s) they will be working on. You can take what you've learned in person and use it remotely. For example, if you use instant messenger to interact, you could use a logo with your "personality color" to remind folks of your preferred communication style.

to be up at an unreasonable hour. At Google TV, our teams are based in South Korea, Poland, and the U.S., so we have an 8:00 a.m. and a 5:00 p.m. PST design review. Also, be sure to rotate all-hands meetings between locations. This makes a huge statement, as the entire senior leadership team will often travel to the remote location to attend the meeting.

The manner with which you begin a meeting is important as well. The U.S., for example, is a task- and goal-driven culture, as opposed to Korea, Brazil, and India, which are relationship-driven. In the latter cases, rather than jumping straight into an agenda, take time at the start of the meeting to exchange pleasantries and reach out to colleagues on a personal level.

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pastime in Korea), even though she can't sing to save her life. To prepare for the trip she read up on Korean culture and learned the proper way to greet people and behave in meetings. Because she took time to get to know the culture, the author won the respect of the Seoul team, and now has a better rapport with them, resulting in more effective collaboration.

Organize an In-Person Meeting

There are a number of wonderful tools to enable remote collaboration, but there are some circumstances in which face-to-face interaction is still needed.

When starting a new project with a global team, it is ideal to hold the first few meetings in person. This is particularly important if the team hasn't worked together before. A face-to-face meeting will help team members establish trust and clearly communicate the project plan and goals from the start.

Try to get to know your team and how they work as early as possible. Many teams find value in assessments such as *StrengthsFinder* books or a variation of *True Colors*. These resources enable team members to learn about

Make Calls Meaningful and Engaging

When meeting with remote team members, it is important to treat all locations equally. Avoid spontaneous meetings and hallway decisions. During meetings, actively engage people on the phone (for instance, periodically ask, "Are there any questions on the phone?") You can also obtain feedback from the remote audience first. If you are conducting design sessions or brainstorms, invest in smart white-boards so that everyone can participate.

Web conferencing is a blessing for global teams. We have successfully used Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, Microsoft Lync, and Skype. These tools are cost-effective and easy to use. Many can be integrated with company calendars so that each meeting invitation automatically generates a web conference link. The tools allow teams to share video and content, which helps to keep people engaged in meetings. Visual cues such as body language also come through in this medium, making meetings much more effective.

If your team holds weekly design reviews, ensure the sessions do not require remote folks

Over-communicate

Communication is always important, but when dealing with different languages and time zones, it becomes even more critical. The more distributed the team, the more important it is that each member knows exactly what they are expected to deliver, to whom, and by what date. When expectations are not clear, the results will be, at best, inconsistent. Establish a "producer and consumer mindset" in which the consumer of a deliverable holds the producer accountable for delivery in a visible way—virtual scrum stand-ups work well.

Most conflicts happen due to poor communication and cultural differences and not because people are malicious. If English is not everyone's native tongue, keep language simple during all forms of correspondence. If a conversation is getting heated and people are getting defensive over email, pick up the phone or have a video chat to resolve it. When dealing with global teams, remember it's better to *over*-communicate. In meetings, ensure all stakeholders are present so that you are getting information from the source and that subject matter experts are clear about what you are asking for.

As a rule, conference calls should result in notes distributed to all team members. Design specifications should be detailed and should not overlook subtleties. You should assume your direction will be interpreted literally, so requirements should be specific. It's best to avoid jargon, acronyms, sarcasm, and other subtle humor, as they leave room for misinterpretation.

Use Artifact-Sharing Tools

Establish a clear communication plan that includes collaboration and document man-

agement tools. Earlier we talked about web conferencing tools that allow users to communicate in real time. Choose tools that allow you to control access, create presentations collaboratively, and address comments without having to create several different versions of a document. Google docs, SharePoint, wikis, and Box.net represent a few popular document-sharing options. Select a tool that works for your team and incentivize team members to use it. Ideally, you should have one repository for all design and user research work.

Also, be sure to engage your distributed teams in research. We are all familiar with the "Aha moments" associated with hearing feedback directly from a customer. With remote teams it is often not feasible to bring everyone together for usability testing, field visits, and other customer activities. However, when possible, broadcast remotely or record sessions so that remote members can participate in real time or view the discussion after the fact.

- Give remote team members critical assignments and provide them with visibility. For example, let them lead demos and take the lead on projects.
- Put aside budget for remote employees to travel to HQ and spend time with their peers.
- Build a strong relationship with someone in the Human Resources department at the remote location. Understand how to reward remote employees since each country has unique rules with respect to items such as salary and bonuses.

In reality, career paths are often not the same across locations—there are usually limited opportunities available in remote locations. Be honest and forthcoming with remote employees and work with them if they want to move to HQ. You can also initiate discussions about lateral moves for growth, such as transition to another discipline that may be of interest

Get to know the local HR person to learn about schools in the area with strong HCI and psychology programs. You can also use your internal networks in that location or contact local professional chapters for leads.

If none of these options are available, or if the talent you find is not up to par, consider hiring employees on a contract basis to start. If you are satisfied with their work, you can convert the contractor to a full-time employee. Many companies also have ambassadorship programs that enable people from HQ to travel to other locations for a period of six months to a year to train employees.

In Summary
There is no doubt that working with remote teams comes with a unique set of challenges. To be successful you must embrace the situation. By following the best practices presented in this article, we have come to appreciate the benefits of diverse perspectives, and we believe that these diverse perspectives ultimately result in better relationships, designs, and products.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Jhilmil Jain is a senior UX research manager at Android with a team that spans the U.S. and the UK. Prior to this role, she was part of the Google TV team, which included members from South Korea, Poland, the UK, and the U.S. She has also worked with Microsoft, where her team was distributed across five U.S. cities, each in a different time zone, and HP Labs, where she oversaw software development in Brazil and India.

Catherine Courage has a passion for transforming corporate culture by making great design a driver of innovation and change. She is SVP of global customer experience at Citrix, and her team's mission is to create world-class products and services that drive an exceptional, total customer experience. She is co-author of the book Understanding Your Users, *and is an active writer and speaker on design.*

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Support and Engage Remote Employees
It is especially important to provide visibility and career growth opportunities to team members working in distributed environments. Otherwise, you may be at risk of losing these employees as they outgrow the opportunities available to them locally, or if they do not get the support and mentorship they need.

Here are a few suggestions that will help you retain and engage remote team members:

- Pair remote team members with UX employees at headquarters (HQ). One person can lead a project in one quarter, the other can lead in the following quarter.
- Assign mentors from HQ to remote junior hires.

to them (for example, research to project management).

Be Mindful when Hiring for Offsite Locations
Finding a particular skill set in a specific location can be difficult. For example, experienced user researchers in Russia, or UX designers in Poland, may be hard to come by. This is primarily because UX is a new discipline and local schools are still in the process of ramping up curricula in this field.

If possible, hire people into leadership roles first. If you only get a requisition for a single new hire, be sure he or she is not junior. It will be difficult for a junior practitioner to be independently effective in a remote office.