



PM Jetsetters

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If you want the inside skinny about outsourcing/offshoring and the global project management marketplace, ask Mark Vorholt and Joseph Collard. They'll tell you straight out that those are more than just the hot business buzz terms of the moment. The words describe a complex and difficult method of conducting business, as well as a hard-to-achieve-and-master career niche that requires major lifestyle adjustments.

In the paragraphs ahead, you're going to get an inside look at this world. Our guides are two men who live it 24-hours a day.

Vorholt is the chief technology officer of dbaDirect, a Cincinnati, Ohio-based database management company whose clients include a cross-section of large and mid-sized companies in all industries. The former PM directs the company's Bangalore offshore operations from the company's Florence, Ken., office.

Collard is CEO of Sumpraxis, a Boca Raton, Fla.-based business process outsourcing company whose clients include insurance, health-care and financial-services companies. Collard directs small teams of PMs in Delhi, India and Shenyang, China.

Both are technically trained PMs; together they bring a couple of decades' worth of offshoring experience to their jobs. While Vorholt's and Collard's companies are different, they share common challenges, all of which shape their world and also the lives of their globe-hopping managers.

Vorholt and Collard have essentially the same mission: to deliver flawless, problem-free services to their customers around the clock. For Vorholt, it's database services; for Collard, it's BPO services.

Simple? In concept only. Achieving it takes the coordination and precision of a professional soccer team. "We totally manage a company's database operations," says Vorholt. "We monitor and fine-tune them, and respond to problems as soon as they crop up. We do everything possible to maintain the integrity of those environments."

To make that happen, dbaDirect's PMs are always on call. That's where the global offshoring teamwork kicks in. In the tough, tense and fiercely competitive outsourcing world, it translates to delivering what Vorholt calls "seamless" services. If one company won't deliver them, rest assured there are several competitors that will.

Achieving that seamless delivery goal has become the obsession of both veteran offshoring managers--as well as every person working for them.

In 2004, Collard started his Delhi operation with the idea that he'd provide PM services exclusively, but then decided to set up a large network of delivered partners and provide additional IT services as well. Collard took a different tack when he launched his smaller China operation in Shenyang last year.

Benefits of Managing an Offshore Operation

dbaDirect's Mark Vorholt lists three essential skills PMs can expect to master:

- 1. Organizational Acumen. Nothing sharpens the ability to articulate the strengths, assets and talents of an organization more than the need to communicate them continually to those working in vastly different countries and cultures. This is just one way PMs can grow into company executives.**
- 2. Best Practices. Outsourcers have access to the best practices (and knowledge of the worst practices) in their field. PMs dealing with overseas outsourcers have access to a global array of this knowledge. This helps them transform the old cliché into "jack of all trades and master of all of them."**
- 3. Operational Excellence. In designing, monitoring and enhancing processes--complicated by multicultural issues and distance--PMs handling offshore projects can learn to be leaders. In unforgiving hypercompetitive markets, the**

“I figured it made more sense to develop our own expertise,” he says. “Initially, we started with 10 Chinese engineers who concentrated on CAD-CAM work. Now we have 15 delivery people, and the five additional programmers concentrate on Flash.”

organizational and relationship skills of PMs are easy to overlook as intangibles. Helping the company increase revenue or cut operational costs is not.

Collard’s Indian and Chinese offices are running smoothly, but it took him several months to get the “intellectual bandwidth,” which he describes as the melding of technical and PM skills and ironing out of cultural differences. That’s no small achievement, considering that his American, Indian and Chinese managers bring very different work styles to their jobs.

Creating the seamless operation

In 1998, Vorholt wrote the business plan for and managed dbaDirect’s Bangalore operation until it was successfully up and running. Initially, the overseas operation consisted of a couple of techies, a PM and a few executives. Today, it’s staffed with 75 technical people, 28 of whom work in the Bangalore office.

Vorholt oversees the Bangalore office from the United States. “It’s project-managed from here, because this is where all the integration work is done,” he explains.

It’s accomplished with two PMs: an American PM working closely with Vorholt and an Indian counterpart in Bangalore. Between the two PMs, the entire operation runs smoothly and delivers almost perfect service.

“If there is a database issue at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning, we have systems that can detect the problem and instantly find the resource to solve it,” Vorholt explains. “The best possible resource for that particular problem may be located at Bangalore. On another occasion, the appropriate resource is onshore, in the U.S. There is never any guesswork about who is best qualified to right a problem.”

Collard has similar systems in place that are ready to solve problems whether they’re in India, China or the United States.

The dangers of making cultural assumptions

Vorholt and Collard can take hard-earned pride in boasting about their well-integrated and well-managed outsourced operations. But they’ll candidly admit that setting up their overseas operations was more difficult than they’d anticipated. And most of the problems revolved around cultural and communication issues with their Indian and Chinese managers.

Like any trained and disciplined PM, Vorholt thought that clear procedures and precise documentation would solve all communication and cultural problems that cropped up and create a smooth working rapport between his American and Indian technical people.

He was wrong.

“From the onset, we were very process-oriented and worked hard to get our act together,” says Vorholt. “We have our own version of best practices for database administration, along with systematic ways to identify problems, no matter how severe.”

But as soon as Vorholt began working with his offshore PMs and techies, he realized that even with all the painstakingly developed documentation, there was confusion and huge knowledge gaps between his American staffers and their Indian counterparts. What Vorholt thought was cut-and-dry was vague and nebulous to his Indian PMs.

Vorholt admits to making two bad assumptions. The first was that he thought the documentation was crystal-clear to everyone (Americans and Indians).

“I discovered that many of the things we do were established in informal meetings and not explained in the documentation manual. So trying to plug in new people from a different culture, after several years into our routines, was not simple.”

Vorholt’s second bad assumption was thinking that American and Indian PMs’ communication styles are the same. Vorholt also learned that meetings with Indian and American PMs had to be conducted differently. American-style meeting rapport, which is usually a rapid-fire, informal exchange of information, was alien to the Indian staffers.

Not only do words often have different cultural meanings, but so do silences. “In America, we take silence as acceptance,” adds

Vorholt. "If I'm on a conference call with two or three people, and I'm running down a list of things that have to be done, if no one stops me to ask questions, I take it as understanding and acceptance."

But that's not what it means to Indian PMs. If they disagree about something or have questions, they'll never even consider interrupting the speaker to ask questions or voice objections, because it's considered rude and disrespectful.

Over time, Vorholt learned to respect Indian business customs and etiquette. Meetings were paused frequently, for example, so questions could be asked. By making it comfortable for the Indian staffers to speak, the communication lines were opened so they could also be active participants.

Communicating with Chinese PMs is equally challenging, according to Collard. "In most Asian cultures, it's unheard of to answer questions with a curt 'yes' or 'no' response. By using translators, I learned that Chinese PMs and programmers expect detailed explanations," hesays.

The beauty of project management, according to Collard, is that methodology can cut through cultural details because it's rich in procedures. "I discovered that a thoroughly defined project can eliminate cultural barriers," he adds.

The toughest problem for both Vorholt and Collard is dealing with time and distance barriers so their companies run smoothly. It's tough for experienced offshore managers to accomplish, and harder still for newbies who think they can cut it.

"We have an expression at dbaDirect: 'The project never sleeps,'" says Vorholt. "It kind of sums up the lifestyle of the international-sourcing PM."

Collard concurs, adding that always being on call can be difficult--even for a veteran globe-traveler like himself. It's especially hard if you're running a small company like Sumpraxis.

"When I have a meeting with one of my PMs in India, I have to remind myself that he's been up for 14 hours," says Collard. "When we have meetings at 7 p.m. (U.S.), it's 7 a.m. in Bangalore. We're still learning how to work with the time zone differences. It's easier for the large outsourcing companies, because they have plenty of people, but it's a lot harder for small ones forced to work harder in order to compete in a fiercely aggressive marketplace."

Vorholt and Collard visit their offshore offices on a regular basis, often monthly, and are constantly bringing their offshore managers to the United States for training sessions and meetings. Video and phone conferences take place frequently.

Summing up, both men love their jobs and couldn't imagine doing anything else. They also realize their value in the career marketplace. "It takes a special kind of person to do this kind of work," says Vorholt. "There is a shortage of qualified PMs with offshoring experience."

Compounding the problem, he adds, is the fact that many qualified PMs don't want to live the frenetic lifestyle of an international manager. "It almost takes a magical combination of skills to do this work," he says.

Vorholt guesses that international-sourcing PM experience can bump up a candidate's salary 25 percent. It's easy to understand when you consider what the job involves. "It's one thing having the repository of skills necessary to be an international PM, but it also takes the right temperament and attitude to manage a project that runs around the clock. That translates to experience and knowledge you're not going to find in any textbook," he adds.

Now you can appreciate why both men always have their suitcases packed so they can board a plane at a moment's notice.

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