

# Synchronizing Work Schedules Across Cultures

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Happy summer to those of you living in the northern hemisphere! Here in Washington DC, we've enjoyed unseasonably cooler temperatures this year punctuated with torrential rainfalls. While my garden loves it, it definitely makes it challenging to enjoy some of our typical summer activities. Despite some reprieve from my usual busyness, I'm still zipping around the country (and abroad) for work. With all the vacationers, airport lines and delays are even worse than usual. Thank goodness for TSA pre-check-in!

Many of my clients are also slowing down, particularly those who work with Europeans where three to four week summer holidays are the norm. Much to my North American-based clients' chagrin, these lengthy vacations are not always applied trans-Atlantic. Instead, many still have to toil away with additional obstacles placed before them when many of their overseas team members are away for weeks on end. Indeed, one of the main comments I'm hearing these days is "how can we move forward and meet our deadlines with so many people absent?"

While labor laws may be impossible to harmonize across nations, there are nonetheless some strategies to mitigate some of the frustrations and better prepare you for work schedule and time differences with your culturally and geographically-dispersed teams. *Click here for some tips to consider.*

- **Determine the normal working days and hours of your team members.** For example, in much of the Middle East, the typical work week is Sunday through Thursday so you'll want to avoid scheduling a conference call on a Friday when your Saudi colleagues are enjoying the weekend. Also, while in many companies workers have adjusted their work hours to better overlap with their overseas team members, always verify each team member's work hours at the start of a new project so you can prepare accordingly for meeting times.
- **Accept that evenings, weekends and vacations are NOT for work.** While it has become progressively expected that workers check emails and work from home at night, weekends and even on vacations in the U.S., attempting to apply this standard globally will more often than not backfire. Here we may be more used to being connected 24/7, however work-life balance is not only expected but mandatory in many parts of the world. Showing regard for your overseas' team members leisure time will not only show compassion for their life priorities, it may also encourage them to be even more engaged and productive during their regular working hours.

- **Set up a plan for continuity when colleagues are on vacation.** In the U.S. it is the norm to delegate certain aspects of your work to a co-worker, however this practice is less common in many parts of the world. For example, in France, where people tend to be very proprietary of their work tasks, it is rare that your French colleague will designate an on-site colleague to fill in for her when they are absent during the month of August. Establishing a clearly defined schedule in advance of summer holidays where all team members can come up with a solution to ensure that milestones met allows for both a collaborative and culturally-sensitive approach to ensuring that work can progress.
- **Respect mealtimes...or not!** A French client once told me that he and his colleagues were often “grumpy” when their American colleagues scheduled meetings during their lunchtime. While we might grab a quick bite to eat at our desk in the U.S., in France meals are sacrosanct and are usually eaten at very specified times with lunch typically served an hour later than in the U.S. In Spain, lunch breaks are even longer and may last two hours or more ending at 4pm. Also beware of occasions when serving lunch is not appropriate. I once trained a group of Iraqis and, while the client was sensitive in selecting Middle Eastern cuisine, they overlooked one critical detail—the event took place during Ramadan when most Muslims do not eat during daylight hours!
- **Check daylight saving schedules.** More than once I have heard about situations when a multi-country conference call was scheduled only to discover that some of the members had the wrong time. There is often a two week difference that clocks are turned forwards or backwards between Europe and North America. Many countries do not apply daylight saving, particularly in the southern hemisphere, so depending on the time of year, your colleagues in Chile may either be in the same time zone or have a two hour difference. Prior to scheduling meetings, it’s always helping to research the time difference with your globally-dispersed colleagues through sites such as <http://www.timeanddate.com/>.

So while assuring the possibility of synchronous communication and stress-free scheduling may not always be possible in all situations, being mindful of some of the cultural approaches to leisure time and schedules can help. It will enable you to be more prepared to come up with creative and collaborative solutions to allow work to progress while taking into consideration different cultural norms.