

# Following the Sun: Facing the Challenges of Distance Collaboration

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## Abstract

In the recent years, globalization and virtualization have led companies to embrace multiculturalism and long-distance collaboration. Whether it is for greater customer proximity, reliable business continuity, or purely economic reasons, more and more firms now hire staff abroad, and thus face new challenges induced by the collaboration of dispersed teams.

This study focuses on long-distance collaboration in the field of technical writing, and aims at determining which methods are the most effective to work at a distance. To begin with, it explores the factors behind the evolution of working conditions for technical writers, leading to the development of distance teamwork in the profession. Through case studies, it then analyzes and criticizes the various processes, methodologies, communication techniques and tools implemented by four companies to support long-distance collaboration between technical writers and their peers, or technical writers and developers.

The main purpose of this article is to identify best practices that help build community and therefore increase productivity, and to suggest methods for improving distance collaboration.

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## 1. Introduction

Due to the current economic climate, distance collaboration has become widespread, and technical writers have to adapt to this new working condition.

This article presents four case studies that illustrate the various challenges that dispersed teams face when collaborating. The four companies under study are:

- Société Générale, a multinational bank.
- HR Access, a software and computing services company specialized in human resources.

- IBM, a global technology and consulting corporation.
- MYCOM, a leading provider of telecommunication solutions.

These case studies allow us to compare solutions that technical writers implement to improve distance collaboration. We also look at how writers resolve issues of productivity.

## 2. The Evolution of Working Conditions:

### Towards Distance Collaboration

Offshoring is not a new phenomenon, and companies have been relocating their manufacturing work overseas since the 1970s

(Levine, 2012). However, the offshoring of services is recent and coincides with the development of technologies that enable distance communication, and therefore distance collaboration<sup>1</sup>. To remain competitive, companies set up offices in areas where labor is skilled and inexpensive, and where regulations and taxes are attractive (Sapsed, 2010). While saving money, companies are also within close proximity to their customers, which helps them establish a brand image in the regions where they sell products.

Distance collaboration has therefore become a major issue in the business world. Due to the advent of globalization, more and more acquisitions are made, and whenever a large company buys a smaller one it is of paramount importance to preserve existing expertise to make the acquisition a success. Efficient distance collaboration is thus essential to the prosperity of a company. But, as our study of four technical writing teams demonstrates, collaborating at a distance can prove challenging for many reasons. The difficulty in establishing a sense of community, understanding cultural differences, and overcoming technical issues or language barriers can considerably hinder the productivity of technical writers.

### 3. Company Case Studies

#### a) Société Générale

The Knowledge Services team belongs to Société Générale Corporate and Investment Banking (SGCIB)<sup>2</sup>. It is dedicated to knowledge management and documentation, and currently made up of 8 members in Paris, France, as well as 5 members in Bangalore, India<sup>3</sup>. This distance

collaboration was set up to transition all technical writing activities related to the maintenance of online help systems for trading and sales applications to Bangalore.

Communication problems arose early on. Some of them had to do with the context of the offshoring process, which could only produce tensions. While five team members were hired in Bangalore, one Parisian member of staff was let go. This made the knowledge transfer from Paris to Bangalore especially difficult, as the Indian staff could sense resentment from their French colleagues.

Additionally, the Bangalore team was offended by what appeared to be a superiority complex on the part of the Paris team<sup>4</sup>. Tensions were aggravated by the language barrier that separated both parties, who used English as a medium of communication, but were non-native speakers and had their own cultural perceptions attached to the use of certain phrases. This created misunderstandings and arguments.

Videoconferences were organized to improve relations, and it was agreed that a middle-of-the-road culture had to be developed through the use of a “third language”. Two documents were designed and distributed among the teams:

- a comparative guide to French and Indian cultural and social behavior.
- a glossary of English terms and phrases to avoid in spoken and written communications.

Another measure was to limit interaction between staff members when an issue arose. A strict protocol had to be followed, and escalation to the team leader was almost immediate.

Today, tensions have disappeared: a frequent turnover prevents grudges from forming, and each technical writer works on his or her own

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<sup>1</sup> Distance communication tools are becoming less and less costly to implement, which encourages companies to embrace distance collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> SGCIB is one of the main divisions of the multinational bank Société Générale.

<sup>3</sup> India is a member of the Commonwealth, which facilitates communication in English. The IT industry in

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India is booming—hence the choice of this country as an offshoring destination.

<sup>4</sup> The Indian team comprises developers turned technical writers. None of them holds a degree in technical writing. They thus had to acquire technical writing skills on the job, which the Paris team held against them.

applications. The team leader now encourages communication between Paris and Bangalore. However, technical issues keep getting in the way. For both teams to be able to connect to the same telephone network, calls need to go through a service desk. Interactions must be planned and a strict duration is set beforehand, making spontaneous calls non-existent. Team members have to rely on emailing and instant messaging to interact, which are less costly but also more impersonal.

A missing sense of community coupled with technical issues seem to be the main reasons why Knowledge Services encounters difficulties when communicating at a distance, and the team leader is currently looking for ways to make calls easier and more friendly to arrange<sup>5</sup>. However, the very nature of the collaboration could be changed to initiate a sense of community—e.g., technical writers could begin working on common projects.

#### **b) HR Access.**

The HR Access documentation team is dedicated to the design and maintenance of user guides and online help systems in Spanish and English. Although part of the same team, technical writers face different challenges depending on the language in which they work.

Every year, a new trainee technical writer is hired to produce all of the Spanish language documentation. Such a frequent turnover makes knowledge transfer and preservation very difficult, and explains why the company's documentation in Spanish is outdated<sup>6</sup>.

The trainee technical writer in charge has access to a SharePoint on which developers based in Madrid, Spain, host functional documents related to software features. He then produces his own documentation based on those resources.

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<sup>5</sup> All team members have been equipped with webcams to make telephone calls more personal.

<sup>6</sup> The current trainee technical writer is documenting software features that were delivered in 2012, which does not provide a good basis for distance collaboration.

Conference calls and screen-sharing sessions with the development team are often arranged to discuss certain software features. All other interactions with the Spanish development team happen via emailing or instant messaging—the staff usually preferring written communication<sup>7</sup>. However, emails are often ignored by developers<sup>8</sup>. This can be attributed to the outdated status of the documentation, which could explain why the development team does not consider documentation to be an urgent matter. A missing sense of community does not seem to be the problem, as trainee technical writers every year are lucky enough to travel to Madrid to meet their Spanish colleagues and form pleasant professional relationships with them.

The documentation process at HR Access in English is very similar to the Spanish language documentation process. However, the number of technical writers and developers working in English is greater<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, English language technical writers rarely work with the same developers from feature to feature, or even release to release, which does not create a sense of community. English language developers are based in Tunis, Tunisia, and technical writers do not get to meet them. Most exchanges between the documentation and development teams happen via email, although such communication can be impersonal and slow. Speaking on the telephone can also be challenging due to the language barrier<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Conversations in Spanish can be challenging for trainee technical writers, and a written record to rely on afterwards is always welcome.

<sup>8</sup> Up to 4 reminders usually have to be sent to trigger a reply.

<sup>9</sup> English documentation: 6 technical writers and 300 developers. Spanish documentation: 1 technical writer and 130 developers.

<sup>10</sup> Although Tunisian developers can speak French, a strong accent and language mistakes can hinder communication.

As we can see, different issues arise depending on the type of documentation being produced (Spanish language or English language), thus calling for different solutions. For Spanish language documentation, there is a need to catch up with the development team so that the trainee technical writer can participate in regular meetings regarding software features in development—therefore implementing a real team process. For English language documentation, organizing physical meetings and/or regular videoconferences with the development team could be a good start. A better understanding of the role of technical writers by developers<sup>11</sup> would also help to establish team spirit.

### c) MYCOM

Throughout our research process, we discovered that many technical writers, particularly those with whom we spoke, view distance collaboration as a challenge that often leads to frustration. Overall, many writers seem to prefer speaking face-to-face with subject matter experts (putting aside of course the advantages of being able to work from home), but this is not a view shared by everyone. As our MYCOM case study demonstrates, some people *enjoy* adapting to the challenges that are inherent to distance collaboration.

MYCOM, an independent provider of network and service performance management and engineering services—in other words, radio and core network design, is a French international company that caters to the world's largest communications service providers. For both economic and follow-the-sun continuity, MYCOM employs over 700 people in France, Taiwan, India, and Tunisia. Only a dozen subject matter experts are located in Paris. Our interlocutor, located in Paris, works daily with a development team in

Taiwan. They communicate typically by email, Skype, and conference calls.

The difficulties that our interlocutor expressed are fairly common: Not being native English speakers, the Taiwanese have difficulty speaking in English. Cultural differences are also a concern (the developers do not easily communicate with their colleagues in Paris when they don't understand something, which can hinder progress). One final challenge that our technical writer encounters is the time difference—that is, all communication with her Taiwanese colleagues must be complete by noon in Paris.

To overcome these challenges, MYCOM has weekly two-hour meetings as well as shorter, daily meetings. This enables our interlocutor to confirm whether the exchange of information has been successful. She also avoids calling them directly, preferring email as a mode of communication to avoid any of the language barriers that arise when speaking in English. Additionally, emails tend to be less formal—that is, sometimes they contain emoticons.

These relatively simple “fixes” are not surprising in and of themselves. What is surprising, however, is the relative eagerness with which our interlocutor at MYCOM accepts the challenge of distance collaboration. For her, working with other cultures is beneficial in the sense that it could open up new doors to future opportunities. She enjoys the challenges and, for her, the occasional frustrations are minor details in the scheme of things.

### d) IBM

The problems that people face when collaborating from a distance have long been of interest to IBM. Having already equipped many of its employees with the tools necessary to facilitate distance collaboration, the very nature of the IBM business model necessitates a global collaboration strategy. From this perspective, the company is now engaging a growing need for its expanding workforce: the need for employees to feel part of a community.

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<sup>11</sup> English language developers are not quick to reply to emails either, and emails often have to be signalled as “urgent”.

IBM has played a seminal role in the development of many collaboration technologies. Today, IBM equips hundreds of thousands of its employees with the technology necessary to communicate with colleagues all over the world. From IBM Notes<sup>12</sup> to the indispensable teleconferencing, technical writers at IBM are regularly in contact with remote colleagues. And these methods of communication are, as far as our case study is concerned, relatively efficient. Nevertheless, our study uncovers challenges unrelated to technology.

The technical writers that we interviewed at IBM collaborate regularly with remote software developers and technical writers. Their tasks vary, but they all work with rather significant writing teams. IBM has acquired the companies that created the software, and each acquisition brought with it a distinct company culture. Hence the challenges: how to integrate new employees into restructured teams while still maintaining a sense of "place" within the company.

Of the two challenges, the former is the most recurrent. Our writers mentioned troubles establishing trust with distant development teams, who might question a technical writer's capacity to convey technical information. Such a lack of trust invariably leads to excessive documentation approvals—as opposed to normal documentation reviews.

The methods with which colleagues chose to communicate are another example. Team preferences, personal preferences, and sometimes cultural practices favor a specific method to make comments on documentation. For example, one of our interlocutors complained that development typically sends documentation reviews by email instead of through the in-house task organizer. Despite communicating her preferences with her

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<sup>12</sup> IBM Notes (formerly the Lotus brand) is a client-server software platform that provides businesses with email, instant messaging, social collaboration tools, and more.

remote collaborators, they nevertheless resumed reviewing the documentation in the same way.

It also seems that the role and limits of technical writing are not always clear to our interlocutors. Some writers are finding it challenging to assert their expertise in the wake of newer, more intuitive user interfaces.

Globally, IBM is sensitive to these open questions and many others. Its large-scale acquisitions, too, contribute to this sensitivity by adding new employees and thus diversifying its company culture. To obtain a unified company culture and to enhance integration techniques, the company has taken a page from social media and created two social platforms designed to enhance the feeling of community: IBM Connections<sup>13</sup> and IBM Jams<sup>14</sup>.

The extent to which these new tools are successful in creating a sense of community is to be seen. But each has had a certain success and each is evolving to further enhance interconnectedness at IBM.

#### **4. Conclusions and Suggestions for Improvement**

From our perspective, companies that hope to engage in distant collaboration should address employee reticence by emphasizing the positive aspects of distance collaboration and by creating a sense of community. Unfortunately, there are no proven techniques or tools to definitively resolve lingering reservations or challenges within a dispersed work environment. Technology like IBM Jams events can help create a virtual community, but it is not an end-all solution, because real communities exist only when they engage people in "collaborative processes over time—not just once a

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<sup>13</sup> IBM Connections is a social software platform for businesses.

<sup>14</sup> IBM Jams was most notably used by the Canadian government to discuss issues of urban development and by hundreds of thousands of IBM employees all over the world.

year at a conference, for example” (Kaplan, 2003). Therefore, engaging a team of writers regularly, providing regular support and fallbacks (as in the Société Générale case) can make for stronger team cohesion.

## **5. Conclusion.**

There may be no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges that dispersed colleagues face when collaborating from a distance, but we hope that the case studies found in this article can provide insight into the diverse approaches that different technical writing teams choose to employ to resolve these challenges.

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## 7. Appendices—Information Tables Supporting Each Case Study

### Case Study A.

	
<b>Company name</b>	Société Générale Corporate & Investment Banking
<b>Industry</b>	Banking and financial services
<b>Employees</b>	12,000 (Société Générale Group: 160,000)
<b>Team studied</b>	Knowledge Services, Information Technology (IT) quality department
<b>Documented products</b>	Trading and sales applications (online help systems)
<b>Team members</b>	<p>Paris, France:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 information system project manager and team leader</li> <li>• 1 documentation project manager</li> <li>• 2 trainee technical writers</li> <li>• 1 intranet and knowledge manager</li> <li>• 3 trainee IT specialists</li> </ul> <p>Bangalore, India (since 2009):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 documentation project manager and team leader</li> <li>• 4 technical writers</li> </ul>

**Case Study B.**

	
<b>Company name</b>	HR Access
<b>Industry</b>	Software
<b>Employees</b>	850
<b>Team studied</b>	Documentation team
<b>Documented products</b>	Human resources and payroll software packages (user guides and online help systems)
<b>Team members</b>	Paris, France: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 technical writers (documentation in English)</li> <li>• 1 trainee technical writer (documentation in English)</li> <li>• 1 trainee technical writer (documentation in Spanish)</li> </ul>
<b>Distance Collaboration</b>	Tunis, Tunisia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 300 developers</li> </ul> Madrid, Spain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 130 developers</li> </ul>

**Case Study C.**

	
<b>Company name</b>	MYCOM
<b>Industry</b>	Telecommunications
<b>Employees</b>	700
<b>Team studied</b>	Documentation team
<b>Documented products</b>	Enterprise software
<b>Local team members</b>	Paris, France: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 technical writer</li> <li>• 1 trainee technical writer (documentation in English)</li> </ul>
<b>Distance Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taiwan</li> <li>• India</li> <li>• Tunisia</li> </ul>

Case Study D.

	
<b>Company name</b>	IBM
<b>Industry</b>	Software, Hardware, Consulting
<b>Employees</b>	432,000
<b>Team studied</b>	Documentation team
<b>Documented products</b>	Enterprise software
<b>Team members</b>	Gentilly, France: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 technical writers</li> <li>• 2 trainee technical writers (documentation in English)</li> </ul>
<b>Distance Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canada</li> <li>• China</li> <li>• India</li> <li>• Israel</li> <li>• United States</li> </ul>

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## 9. Webography

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