

Where is home in the global project village?

Globalisation is all very well but without strong local structures that can promote diversity, the entire effort can easily descend into a quest for conformity and control. Dr Leandro Herrero says there are more creative ways to run an international business

They started calling him James Bond, and this wasn't a good start. His name was Arthur. He had been appointed global project leader in a major pharmaceutical company and was very excited. A scientist straight from the labs, he saw this as a real opportunity to lead a project from bench to market in what he called real life. But the shock was great.

First of all, the James Bond thing. The Frenchman was to blame. Arthur, literally just appointed, had chaired an international project team meeting attended by affiliate representatives. The Europeans had a strong presence. Arthur made a mistake. He introduced himself with, "I am the global project leader", to which the Frenchman, with a smile as big as the Eiffel Tower, retorted, "and I am a pan-galactic follower".

Arthur didn't get it immediately, carrying on as if nothing had happened. Antoine, the Frenchman, looked at a colleague in the audience and said, "another one for whom the world is not enough; à la James Bond". "The question is," his colleague responded, "will he have a licence to

kill?" Antoine replied, "We don't kill compounds, my friend, we wait and wait until we have the right kind of data."

Arthur had been sent to the project leadership world with no tools other than Microsoft Project on his laptop, an encouraging announcement from his boss, and a calendar of pre-scheduled meetings. It was not even clear whether he would carry on in his previous lab job. But this is how things worked: appointments were made without ever figuring out how they were going to work in real life.

Yet, Arthur was excited. A PhD in pharmacy, good published work and a spell as a pharmacist, he was a driven guy, the type that gets ahead. He had been chosen to take on global responsibilities, so the announcement said, because of his technical

knowledge. It soon became clear, however, that Arthur's inability to generate commitment around the project was as big as his title. Arthur belongs to the legions of technical people who find themselves in charge of global projects on the naïve rationale that because they are good at science, they must be able to lead a scientific project.

Like his pre-Microsoft Project laptop, Arthur had no mental software to deal with the transcultural issues, financial management or commercial developments that his new role required. To make things worse, he was not particularly good at people management. He learned nothing from the 'pan-galactic follower' comments or maybe he was just the kind of guy who could swallow anything. We'll never know. Arthur left the company after nine months in his global role to become chief scientific officer of a start-up. The official reason for the move: he could not handle so much travel.

The globally homeless project

Looking back over those tragicomic months, it seemed that the more Arthur tried to play a global role, the less he got from his followers. The reasons, with the benefit of hindsight, are obvious. He led a project that could be labelled 'homeless'. The affiliates, who in his company provide the resources for development, were not impressed with the moves towards globalisation and increasingly reluctant to agree to centralised plans that cater for 'the planet'. The French wanted French peculiarities, investigators and comparators. The Brits could not see how their agency, or the European one for that matter, would ever digest the US born plans. The Germans insisted that the US classification of diseases was not recognised by them. The commercial guys couldn't agree on peak sales projections because the indication, they claimed, was a moving target. It was chaos. And expensive chaos. Arthur, the scientist, became increasingly frustrated owning, not a project, but a little-used office on the East coast of the US and a growing air miles balance. He led a global project that ended up belonging nowhere.

Arthur's story is not uncommon. People are becoming global project managers and leaders, global directors, heads of global business, etc, all the time. But nothing really changes: these same people who the day before had tremendous difficulty locating Strasbourg on a map, are now supposed to lead worldwide projects. New business

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cards are ordered with the word 'global' before the old title, but that's as much as one can expect in terms of change of direction. And what is global anyway and why the fuss about it?

For a start, in terms of geography, most so-called 'global' operations are not truly global but, at best, regional. I am not playing with words. In drug development, one can have a US-Europe tandem but Japan is not yet in the same boat. Many companies still understand 'global development' (of drugs) as doing the same thing everywhere at the same time. Calls for efficiency to be justified are usually preceded by graphs showing a gap of five years between the registration of drugs on either side of the Atlantic. Agreed, that isn't good. But to send uncompromising orders for globalisation has a cost. The quest for uniformity in terms of plans, research endpoints, design and methodology of clinical trials can lead to a diluted common denominator programme without much focus. In some cases, for example, the target population of studies grows by the day in an attempt to make everybody happy. The unhappiness comes when efficacy cannot be shown.

Then there is the question of what could be called the dominant regulatory authority. The US is the biggest drug market and has the greatest price flexibility. It seems logical that what the FDA wants is what one should aim for. The slight problem is that – to be politically incorrect about it – the FDA is just one of dozens of regulatory authorities that companies deal with and it is not always the most rational in its requirements.

Companies that operate worldwide are still too FDA-centric and the frustration of their internal people around the world is often heightened unnecessarily by this approach. But what's the problem with being focused on the biggest market? I have come across many employees of US companies sitting in Paris or Bussels saying the problem is not that their companies are FDA-centric, but that they pretend they are not. Many would rather have an acknowledgement that, in a 'we-are-all-equal' world, the FDA is more equal than others, than the continued pretence that they are part of a truly democratic global programme.

Globalisation, in the sense of doing everything everywhere to everybody's satisfaction, and at the same time, is a fallacy. The corporate obsession with uniformity of process, systems, strategies and, why not, product lines, kills the very objective of efficiency that people who embrace it are supposed to have. Uniformity means control and, allegedly, cost-effectiveness. But, in many cases, the more one tries the more difficult it gets. First of all, you have the Antoinettes who have antibodies against megalomaniac dictations from headquarters. Secondly, you spend your life trying to find a consensus of the constituencies around the world. When you find it, you obtain a diluted common denominator product. And thirdly, the home effect is lost.

More interesting is the unintended consequence of globalisation: the absence of home effect. The



Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

James Bond, acting as a global project leader in a pharmaceutical thriller, would have no problem dealing with dissidents. Sadly, not everyone in the real world can be typecast so perfectly.

Arthurs of this world lead homeless projects that don't belong anywhere and to which everybody finds it difficult to relate. Diluted and 'decaffeinated', globally agreed programmes face the uncomfortable problem of identity.

Everyone wants to belong

Most of us want to belong somewhere. It may be a country, an idea, a church or a soccer club. Or combinations. We want to know where home is. As a foreigner living in the UK I am used to being asked by people, perhaps puzzled by my accent, "So, where is home for you?" We all have different answers. Mine usually is a big "here" with my arms pointing to the ground and a smile. If you are Irish, home is always somewhere between Derry and Kerry even if you have been living in Connecticut for the past 20 years. Everybody has a home and many times it has a parochial connotation. OK, there are people who believe in global citizenship or who are at home in the universe. At a spiritual level, religions are usually transnational, but when it comes to more pedestrian topics, one wants to belong to some sort of approachable, close-to-home club.

The best kept secret for successfully globalising an enterprise is to maintain a sort of federation of unique, powerful components that are both differ-

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ent and have strong identity. This is usually seen as a paradox. The worst method is to have one single, or ‘pan-galactic’, structure that looks, feels, and behaves the same. Creativity and innovation have never thrived on uniformity and homogenisation. The challenge is how to keep diversity and still run a business with focused objectives. The answer is in structuring it with organisational architecture that contains clear rules but also tolerates as much diversity as possible.

To use the word ‘tolerate’ in the context of diversity is actually very conservative use of language. Diversity is one of those words that means different things to different people. Search for ‘diversity’ as a keyword in a US context and you will get all the literature on racial integration. For many, in that part of the world, diversity is something to do with skin colour. Fair enough, but what about diversity of ideas, approaches, systems, organisational settings, etc? Diversity in organisational terms sits somewhere along a spectrum. At one end there is intolerance to diversity and, pretty much, people have agreed it doesn’t work. Going up the scale there is tolerance, which is rather passive but certainly better. Up the ladder still there is the act of embracing, which means to accept differences with pride. At the top there is the active pursuit of diversity.

The scale correlates inversely with control. The more intolerance there is of diversity (in ideas, processes, systems, people, etc), the easier it is to control things. The more tolerance, the more control is lost. Welcome to true leadership qualities. Uniformity of global teams (structures, systems, kinds of people) brings control, kills diversity and creativity, and ends up ‘decaffeinating’ objectives. Global projects must have local homes for people to relate to. It is only when people have the reassurance of home – be it a functional home, geographical home, or sub-project home – that they will be able to choose a global objective.

Arthur thought it was the other way around and took for granted that because people had been allocated to a global project, they not only belonged to it but felt like belonging. Arthur never asked the right questions. Had he done so, Antoine would have replied, “I am a medical doctor, working for X-France”, openly declaring his homes: the medical community, followed by his culture and geography. Like Antoine, other professionals, increasingly those in IT, express themselves as belonging to the guild. “I am IT, I work for Y”, they say, as opposed to “I work for Y, I am IT”.

I propose the following working principles to establish true globalisation within a firm.

First, it is important to acknowledge that we operate in a complex world where very different models of reality coexist: medical practices, healthcare traditions, management traditions, etc. Tolerating this diversity is not enough; embracing it is paramount, as is seeking it in, for example, the people one hires. This may be the key to innovation but one has to be prepared to take extra

painkillers for the headaches that result from having multi-point, multi-national, multi-ideas converging into one global objective.

Acknowledge also that excellence comes from diversity and that managing diversity is becoming the most important corporate talent. Meanwhile, internally, tap into all sources of intellectual capital across the firm, and maximise the organisation’s knowledge wealth regardless of geography. Centralise or decentralise ownership and responsibility for projects and processes depending on knowledge, effective decision making and/or best execution. Your best project leader may be quite remote from HQ. Be prepared to be surprised.

Behavioural measures are needed

A globalisation implementation needs to be translated into concrete behavioural measures that are not only consistent with the philosophy but also promote, nurture and develop it. Globalisation of the firm needs more than a declaration, use of language or new business cards. It may entail a whole project leadership school for training people to deal with multi-country, multi-ideas and multi-identities of followers. Leaders may also need skills in financial management, commercial awareness or the ‘rules of the game’ as in decision making, priority setting and resource allocation. For this to work, things must be thought through with adequate support.

Instead of declaring the global aspect of the project by decree and pretending that this should be home for people working on it, make sure that you understand, protect and nurture all ‘homes’. Projects can be, and undoubtedly many should be, global but not at if the result is the lowest common denominator, homogeneity of process and systems or centralised control. Let the global project have several strong, well-furnished homes where people can relate to it.

Promote the branding of teams and sub-teams (including logos and external image if needed), and worry about those ‘homes’ first. If you succeed in allowing these to have strong identities, it will be easier for people to identify with the global project. Finally, as a diagnostic tool, ask your fellow companions: “Where is home for you?” 

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