



WHERE IN THE WORLD...

Managing treasury professionals is increasingly a cross-border task. Rebecca Brace talks to treasurers about how they avoid their meaning getting lost in translation

Managing a team of treasury staff successfully can be challenging – but those challenges are likely to be even greater when some members of the team are located in different countries. From overcoming time zone differences to resolving cultural obstacles, treasurers with geographically dispersed members of staff may find that they need to come up with creative solutions to keep their teams motivated and productive.

The challenges

One of the most obvious challenges is that of managing teams in significantly different time zones. UK treasurers may only share a couple of hours of the working day with colleagues in Asia, meaning that any interaction with those colleagues has to be compressed into a relatively short space of time. Meanwhile, language differences can restrict communication in both directions: the overseas treasury team may not have a clear understanding of what they have been asked to do – while the treasurer may not fully grasp their team members' ideas, goals and concerns.

Cultural issues can also prove problematic. Treasury teams in far-flung locations may feel peripheral, leading to the development of an 'us and them' mentality. Misunderstandings may also arise if different communication styles are not properly understood. For example, a treasurer may finish

a conversation feeling that staff members have agreed to a particular strategy, only to find later that the measures that have been put in place are not really suitable for the overseas team.

Samantha Allen, treasury manager at security company G4S, covers Asia-Pacific and the Middle East. "Our treasury function is head-office-based, although some of the countries have their own local treasury managers as well," she says. "From head office we manage the bank relationships and negotiate facility documents for the regional teams, as well as organise funding, risk management strategies, dividends, cash repatriation, and look at any recapitalisations, reorganisations, disposals and acquisitions."

The company has been consolidating its banking arrangements in a number of countries, most recently undertaking rationalisation of bank accounts in Indonesia. Allen says that the company's group banks have been an invaluable source of local expertise and knowledge, and have also been instrumental in facilitating communication with the local finance teams.

"This has been quite a learning experience in light of the language difference," says Allen. "I have found that I have had to step back and let the bank's implementation team hold meetings locally where they can have discussions in Indonesian – otherwise so much critical information gets missed. I can then separately have update calls >

with the bank on the progress and pick up where necessary with the local team.”

Even when language differences are not an issue, overseas staff members may have priorities and goals that are different to those of the group treasury. “I have had to learn to accept that our group treasury priorities and the timing of their implementation have to fit in with those of the local, regional and other group function teams,” says Allen. “The finance teams have a lot of work on with monthly reporting and have businesses to help run, so I have to be persistent in clearly setting out what I need them to do and why it supports the group objectives – such as reducing risk, improving corporate governance and the benefits of efficient cash management.”

Leaning on technology

Wherever team members are based, clear communication is key to an effective management strategy. Sharon Rolston, group treasurer at consumer goods firm Diageo, says that the company’s treasury team is predominantly based between London and Budapest. “We also interact a lot with the in-market resources teams and finance teams,” she says.

As Rolston observes, “Whether you are managing a team in the same location or in different ones, you have to start by setting out a clear direction for what the team needs to achieve – both

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from a business deliverable perspective and from a personal development perspective. You have to be able to communicate that clearly, so the teams are clear on the priorities and deliverables, no matter where they sit.”

When it comes to communicating effectively with overseas team members, treasurers may find that video calls are more effective than phone calls. Although Allen initially visited the office in Indonesia, technology has been

TOP TIPS

- Make yourself available to overseas team members and keep them up to date on all developments so they don’t feel isolated from the rest of the team.
- Engage with overseas treasury professionals as often as possible – both as a team and individually.
- Be prepared to change your style of communication depending on the country – and, indeed, person – you are dealing with.
- Be flexible in order to overcome time zone differences – even if that means checking in for key meetings in the middle of the night.
- Make the most of videoconferencing or video-messaging technology.
- Take time to visit overseas offices in person when possible.

an important tool for communicating remotely on an ongoing basis. “Recently, the whole company has ‘gone Google’, so globally we all have the same platform for email, messenger and video calls,” she says. “That has been helpful in improving day-to-day contact with our teams, because no matter where they are based, you can connect easily. Having readily available videoconferencing has also helped, as it is easier to avoid misunderstandings when you can see

people’s body language, and it helps to put a face to the name.”

Technology has also proved invaluable for Bente Salt, head of treasury at business services company Rentokil Initial, who has two direct reports in the UK, one in the Netherlands and one in Malaysia. In addition to keeping in daily contact via email, Salt also uses Google Hangouts to run face-to-face meetings with her overseas team members, individually and together.

“As a team, we have monthly treasury meetings where each team member on a rotational basis does a presentation on what’s going on,” she says. “Then we talk about the projects that the team is working on and any specific issues that each team member has – so we’re working relatively closely as a team, despite the geographical spread.” While time zone differences make communication more challenging with the team member in Malaysia, the company has an FD in Asia who acts as a local point of contact, as well as support.

Other treasurers, including Rolston, choose to take advantage of videoconference facilities. “That’s a very effective way for us to be able to hold meetings without having to travel and be in that particular location,” she says. “While you can’t replace being there in person, it definitely supplements it by being able to communicate with people via videoconference, both individually and as a team.”

Beyond screen time

While technology can make a big difference to communication, it is not without its limitations. As Salt notes, “It doesn’t work as well as sitting opposite someone on a day-to-day basis, just because you hear what people are doing – you hear the phone calls and the general conversation. But you can certainly use technology to your advantage if you have people overseas.”

In order to make effective use of video meetings, treasurers should do more than simply ensure that all the relevant people are in attendance. According to Rolston, one key consideration is to make sure that people in remote locations feel they are part of the team, rather than on the periphery. “This means being very cognisant of involving them in meetings and team sessions, calling out their names and asking for their contributions.”

When feasible, treasurers may still supplement video meetings with in-person visits in order to cement relationships. Rolston says that senior leaders in the team rotate their visits to the Budapest team, so that one of them visits for a few days every month. Other treasurers may only be able to justify occasional visits – but such opportunities can still make a big difference when it



require varying levels of management, motivation and guidance. “In my experience, one size doesn’t fit all – some people are very good at being able to take your lead and input and run with it, while others need more frequent interaction,” says Rolston. “I think knowing your people and what works for them is even more important when you are trying to manage remote locations.”

Treasurers should also be conscious that overseas team members may be missing out on the ongoing coaching and direction that will be available to people based in the same office. “When someone is sitting beside you it’s very easy to give immediate feedback to people on things they’ve done well or things they need to work on,” Rolston adds. “You have to be more focused on trying to do that so that you are still providing that coaching.”

Team building

Finally, treasurers should understand that there is more to management than simply giving and understanding instructions. Overseas team members will inevitably miss out on the informal interactions that can play a big part in team building and simply understanding the roles played by everyone in the team – such as a quick chat in the hallway or catching up over lunch in the cafeteria.

As Salt concludes, “Make sure that you are inclusive of your people who are overseas, and make sure you engage with them on a regular basis – both as a team, so that everyone knows what’s going on, and on a one-to-one basis. And every now and then, just phone up for a chat – not necessarily a work chat, just a personal chat about how things are going and what you’re doing at the weekend.”

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Treasurers may face different challenges when communicating with parts of the business that may not have a clear understanding of treasury.

When it comes to dealing with the regional teams, Allen has been trying to get them to have a deeper understanding of the role of treasury. “Sometimes we are not engaged early enough in a process or where there is a

problem to resolve – which is not always ideal given the regulatory restrictions we have to deal with,” she explains. “But it’s all about building trust – now that I’ve worked on a couple of issues with them I think they understand that we are there as a value-add and we want to help.”

“That’s my job every day,” comments the UK-based treasurer of a retail company. “I think it’s

about keeping it simple, using analogies and talking about treasury in terms that people understand. So if you’re talking about foreign exchange you can use the example that if someone is going on holiday, it’s going to cost you more – and then take it a few steps further to explain the issue. Mostly I try to steer clear of using too many acronyms.”

comes to building a closer dialogue and gaining a greater understanding of the overseas team’s culture and priorities.

Meanwhile, it is more important than ever for treasurers to have strong interpersonal skills when their teams are geographically dispersed. Being able to listen effectively to others,

understand the key messages and report accurately on what has been heard is an essential skill. Treasurers should also be prepared to adjust their communication styles when dealing with people in different countries.

In addition, treasurers should be conscious that individuals may



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