IBM in a Time of Globalization

A conversation with Kyle Sarrazin, a Software engineer at IBM by Ethan Thibault

I work with a team comprised of people from around the world. Through innovations in technology I can communicate with these people. This is extremely helpful with the mixing of ideas, but there are also barriers that make communication difficult, like language and cultures.

I am a software engineer here at IBM. From day to day I am designing information technology systems. We make chips for companies worldwide. I don't interface with IBM customers; I'm not on the sales side at all. The teams that I work with are completely global though. On a day to day basis, I will have phone calls with people in Germany, Singapore, Vietnam, Egypt, and the United States. The project I'm on right now is about 22 people big and I would say the majority of those folks are from the United States, but we have about eight in Germany, and two in Singapore as part of the team. Those are the day to day working members of our team.

Email is obviously a huge method of communication and conference calls are another. What can be challenging is the time difference. Germany isn't so bad, they are about six or eight hours, but with Singapore you're almost dead on 12 hour difference. That means either early morning calls or later in the night calls to try to get that overlap. A lot of times Germany will have phone calls; Singapore will usually be via email. You typically don't pick up the phone to call anyone anymore. If you need to ask someone a question you instant message them.

In my opinion, cost, from an IT perspective, is a big driving factor as to where employees are located. Since I have been in the engineering field, which has been almost 25 years, by far the biggest change has been the internet. That has really allowed us to work globally like this. When I first started working, you worked with your department. You walked into work in the morning and you all sat down together in the same aisle and you would have a meeting room and you would go meet, figure out what you're doing, and be working on the project. That was it. Sure there were some phone calls here and there, but you largely worked with the team you were local with. Now, as I described to you, my team is around the work and that's only possible really because of the internet bringing us the capability to have fast email, fast voice

communication, fast instant messaging, and screen sharing. None of that was possible 15 years ago.

Language barriers can also cause a problem. Germany is not so bad, Mexico is not so bad, Belarus is very difficult, and Vietnam is very difficult. If I need to send a message to someone in Singapore, it's easier messaging where I'm typing, they get a chance to read it, digest it, and respond back to me by typing; rather than if I were to pick up the phone and call them. We would have a more successful communication with instant messaging.

The other thing I would mention, and is from a globalization perspective, and this is important, is cultures. When you're in the United States, culturally, when you're in a meeting with your boss or upper management, it is quite common to have an engineer stand up and speak his mind and say, wait I don't necessarily agree, I don't think that's the best approach because if we did that we would end up in this situation, what if we went this way? Here in the United States that goes. That's viewed as, hey that's awesome, speak up! You do the same type of thing in Japan, China, and Singapore, it does not happen that way. Engineers yield to their supervisor. So the only person who talks in the room is the highest level person in the room and no one will disagree with them. So if that person is completely off their rocker with their proposal, the engineers will not speak up, with I think we should do it this way. When you get Singapore engineers on the team, and if you're the engineer lead on the project, you really have to fight to make sure that their opinion is heard, otherwise their opinion is just yours, the engineering leads opinion.

If you're in a country where all of a sudden the economy turns around like India communication is difficult. When we first started outsourcing, India was the hot bed. IBM has about 80,000 employees in India. When we started that's where everything was. The economy of India was going gangbusters and the turnaround was just really high. We were losing people and that becomes frustrating because it takes so long to integrate them into the teams, iron out these cultural differences, to understand how the communicate, for them to understand how you communicate only to see them turn around and leave. It was just so frustrating. So it actually turns out better when you outsource to a country where the economy isn't quite so strong because people will stay around longer.

I think globalization is positive. If I look at personal affects right to me sometimes in the Burlington area I think, boy it's been negative in a way, there's been so much job loss and a lot of that I think is due to globalization, but it's to be expected, it's natural. Maybe IBM in Essex Junction is suffering, but there are other companies that are thriving due to globalization. So it is what it is, it's not like you can stop it. Overall, for IBM I think it has been good; it's opened up a ton or markets for IBM. IBM's biggest planned growth is Africa. That all happens because of globalization. I think overall it's a good thing. It's made some people around here very nervous and I think the semiconductor industry has been somewhat hit hard by that, as fabricators open up around the world it makes us from a cost competitive stand point, fall behind.