

VIRTUALLY INTERNATIONAL

## Praise for *Virtually International*

*Virtually International's* timing couldn't be better. The era of remote work and virtual meetings has been foisted upon us, and Dodson harnesses his years of international business experience in crafting the definitive guidebook to the Zoom generation. Highly readable, entertaining, and informative, *Virtually International* is overflowing with lessons for companies aiming to unite their teams of employees scattered throughout the globe to best accomplish their goals.

— Rob Schmitz, *International Correspondent*,  
National Public Radio (NPR)

A comprehensive must-read for those working in or managing virtual, international teams. Combining personal experience with management theory, Bill effortlessly details the complexities, challenges, opportunities and rewards of working across cultures, geographies and time zones.

— Viktoria Kish, Founder, International Study Programs

Dodson has written the right book at the right time. Remote work is the new normal, but the unfortunate truth is that most organizations are simply not good at building or managing hybrid teams. Dodson not only analyzes the challenges, but offers practical, actionable solutions that can be implemented immediately.

— Andrew Hupert, Professor of International Negotiation, Hult  
International Business School

Dodson's extensive work and writing experience across Asia and Europe make him eminently suited to produce a book like *Virtually International*. An informative and engaging read!

— Patrick Williams, Senior Vice President, Asia at Rosti Group

I've interviewed over a hundred leaders in the remote work space, getting their take on what effective remote leadership looks like. William stands out among them for having a holistic set of principles honed through the course of a long career, one that started before working with distributed teams had a name. If you aspire to manage or lead people spread across the world, this book must be on your shelf.

— Luís Falcão de Magalhães, Founder at Think Remote and  
Host of the DistantJob Podcast

A book about the virtual business world that is insightful and entertaining! Who knew it was possible? Dodson has lived this topic, from China to Seattle, for the last twenty-five years, and he packs all of his knowledge, wisdom, and humor into these pages. Get it today, build your 21st-century team the right way and tell them Turner sent you (I don't get a commission, but it still sounds cool).

— Turner Sparks, Internationally Acclaimed Comedian; Co-host, *The Lost in America Podcast* (#1 Comedy Podcast in Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2020!)

Dodson succeeds in capturing the key enablers to successful remote project management. Having completed a new factory-build during the pandemic, with a hybrid international team, the content and tone of the book resonates very closely to my actual experience. We heavily leveraged the latest technologies Dodson refers to and managed to maintain transparent communication across diverse cultures in five countries.

— Chris Dineen, Managing Director at Electrolux Professional  
(Thailand) Co.,Ltd

# VIRTUALLY INTERNATIONAL

How Remote Teams Can Harness  
the Energy, Talent, and Insights  
of Diverse Cultures

BY

WILLIAM R. DODSON



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India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For my daughter,  
Sarah Elisabeth*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William R. Dodson is an author, journalist, management advisor, and technology educator. He has been working with and managing virtual international teams since 1997 across dozens of countries. His expertise is in cross-cultural team communications, remote project management, and cross-border organizational change.

He lived and worked in China for more than 10 years. He assisted Western organizations entering into and restructuring in Asia.

He is the author of two books about the social, economic, and technological developments shaping 21st-century China. A graduate of Cornell University in Physics, he lives in Greater Seattle.

# INTRODUCTION

## ALL JOKING ASIDE

A Slovakian, a Spaniard, an Indian, a German, a Brit, and an American walk into a meeting. After a few minutes, the American asks the Slovakian about the Italian.

The Slovakian answers matter-of-factly, “He’s late.”

Though this sounds like a setup for a bad joke, it’s not meant to be. Instead, it’s the real-world start of a daylong workshop in Spain. The session occurred in-person and online, a so-called hybrid model of organization. It’s late spring of 2019.

The Slovakian, who has flown in from Holland to facilitate the session, arrives first in the conference room an hour before start time.

The Indian, German, and Brit will be calling in from the organization’s Holland office, each participating from their own workstations. The Spaniard – who normally resides in Spain – is calling in from Australia as a digital nomad lodged in an AirBnB. They will all be joining through videoconferencing technology with me, the lone American. I am calling from my home in Seattle, on the west coast of the United States. Three other local professionals physically gather in the conference room in Spain. They are recent additions to the workshop.

The Italian’s late arrival is problematic. He knows where the projection equipment and speakers are, so those who are attending in the flesh can see and hear those who are attending virtually.

They all speak English as a Second Language (ESL), except me, a native American-English speaker. It’s past midnight in Seattle, on the west coast of the United States, a nine-hour difference to Spain. Though I had taken a shower just an hour before to pep up for the meeting, I’m already feeling sleepy. It’s way past my bedtime, and my body is rebelling at the hour and the task at hand.

Pity the Spaniard in Australia, too. It's early evening for her. She has a 14-hour difference in time zones to Spain with which to contend. At least the callers in Holland have only an hour's difference (ahead of) Spain. They were likely the best rested of the distributed group.

Though I had arranged the workshop, and the Slovakian and I had done the planning for it, it feels as though we had the least amount of control over the proceedings. Technology, culture, time zone differences, and the complexity and urgency of the topic at hand, all seemed to have conspired against us.

Eventually, the Italian shows up. He helps find and get the speakers working. There is no projector, apparently. Not everyone has brought their laptop computers to the conference room. Virtual attendees will appear as miniature talking heads at the end of the long conference table in the crowded room.

Forty minutes after the official start of the meeting, during which we had to fiddle incessantly with the video and audio technologies, I kicked the workshop off with a few words. Then my Slovakian collaborator launched into the work for the day. I sat in on the first two hours of the session. I probably understood about half of what was said in the conference room: the mix of accented English and my inability to make out the facial expressions and body language of people around the table made comprehension difficult and exhausting. When someone spoke from a remote location, they would snap into view and blink out when someone else cleared their throat.

I wondered how much of the talk other remote participants understood or were even interested in. Attention tends to wane when we can't make out what someone is saying. Even though everyone was speaking English, they had their own personal take on how to speak the language. It is, though, how an increasing number of business meetings around the world will be conducted.

Many people, many cultures, many borders, many accents, many time zones, and many agendas comprise the modern meeting. Add to that mix the many, sometimes conflicting, technologies, and we at least have the puzzle pieces for how work will be assembled in the future. But you may just as well be videoconferencing between your home office and the head office as working remotely with international collaborators.

Likely, about 20% of professionals in the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union (EU) will be working from their homes at least three or four days a week in the near future.<sup>1</sup> They'll more likely travel into a corporate-specific coworking space for face-to-face meetings than they will continue the drudgery of commuting to a central work location. But whether

they are fully remote from home or do their nine-to-five from an office building, more and more they will be working across national borders with professionals from other cultures far more than they had been before 2020. But the advantages far outweigh the coordination challenges in culturally mixed projects.

Indeed, Nicole Sahin, CEO of Globalization Partners, observed something that I had only intuited two decades ago. She said, “As a company with offices in every corner of the globe, I’ve seen the incredible business advantage in hiring and building diverse teams.”<sup>2</sup> There is a clear correlation between innovation and diversity, too.

Research firm Gartner found that companies hiring people with varied ways of thinking and perspective – or cognitive diversity – generate high-performance teams. In 2020, Gartner predicted that 75% of organizations with frontline decision-making teams in distributed geographies and with diverse mindsets would exceed their financial targets by the end of 2022. The research firm asserts that employee performance is 12% higher in diverse companies than in homogeneous teams.<sup>3</sup>

This book, *Virtually International: How Remote Teams Can Harness the Energy, Talent, and Insights of Diverse Cultures*, is a guidebook on facets of the new remote work. This book also intends to show how readers can make the new technology work for them and for their collaborators around the world. It will provide cases, anecdotes, and models for how accidental international managers can build and flourish with international teams. The objective of this book is for readers to eventually out-innovate and out-perform conventional teams in your industry. But it will take a bit of practice.

## MY VIRTUAL LIFE

It was in March 2020 that I had a thought: “I wonder if I can find that team-building article I wrote years ago,” I mused. I ran an online search, unsure even of what year I had published the piece.

Lo and behold, there it was, behind a paywall of the Project Management Institute – “Virtually International: Managing Globalized Project Teams.” I had published the piece in the April 1998 edition of the Project Management Institute’s prestigious journal *PM Network*. In the article, I discussed

the cultural and technology challenges of running teams across national borders.

Best I could count, more than a dozen academic papers and several books had referenced *Virtually International* since the article's publication. It seemed it was one of the first papers to ever address the dawning reality of people managing project teams internationally at a distance.

The article was born from my experience working on a global group for an international management consultancy. The group was made up of service professionals from four continents and a dozen countries. We worked in teams of two or three. It was 1997.

Every few weeks we were mixing and matching colleagues to work on projects in different countries. In those days, videoconferencing was rather exotic, the hardware and telecommunications services expensive. So we were always on the phone for conference calls with counterparts in two or three other countries simultaneously to coordinate activities.

The company was already making sophisticated use of the Internet, so we had email, shared repositories of files, and knowledge bases to build and draw from. However, compared to most others in the company, we used the Internet for transcontinental business support as opposed to in-office administration. I believed back then that I was living in the future and wanted to tell others about it. And so *Virtually International* was born.

My first international business videoconference occurred in 2003. It was on a huge screen. The American side of the screen had about a half-dozen people, as did the Chinese side. The videoconference occurred at night. I led the opening discussion between an American company based in Indiana and a Chinese manufacturer located near Shanghai. The meeting went well, launching another phase of my virtual life.

Since then, I've had the good fortune (and kicked down a few doors) to live and work in other countries and cultures. A decade residing in China provided me great cross-cultural experiences and observations. I worked with Chinese government officials and businesses, and American, and European companies to gain an insider's view of east-west cultural relations. One of the most challenging and fulfilling experiences was leading an organizational team based in Singapore while my office was in Shanghai.

We had to implement a new region-wide software system. We also had to align the business processes of a dozen countries in the region. I reported on a weekly basis to executives in Chicago and London. That was 2013–2014.

Meanwhile, since I had written that paper in the late 1990s, technology was making communications faster, easier to use, and more ubiquitous. After repatriating to the United States just after completion of the transnational project in Asia, I established an international consultancy that drew on talent from around the world. The Spain project mentioned above was one of those projects. Across projects, collaborators were based in countries in Asia, Canada, and Europe.

Most of the client companies were tech startups in Europe. I was managing as many as eight or nine projects at a time across the Atlantic and Pacific, which made for very long days. Then the pandemic of 2020 brought most of that activity to a screeching halt, as it did for millions of others. It proved to be a good time to look back and forward, Januslike. It was also a fortuitous time to consider the future of work in the Western world, as well.

## NEW THINKING

After 30 years of working on, leading, advising, and writing about technology, organizations, and societies, I have arrived at several observations:

- Organizations are networks.
- No organization operates in isolation from other networks.
- Teams reflect the values of the networks in which they are formed.

Every organization and team across every sector and country in the world is the result of people in some level of coordination responding to imperatives. The imperatives may be market opportunities, social imbalances, and solutions meant to fill policy vacuums. When people coordinate their work between themselves, they create a network called an organization. Even the two-guys-in-a-garage stereotype forms a network, and they won't find success in a vacuum. Growing a business means growing a network and integrating with other networks. As we'll see in Chapter 1 of this book, not every organization or industry is geared for remote work. Remote work is a way of extending networks and making them more fluid and flexible than conventional hierarchies.

Chapter 1 discusses the organization structures best-suited to meet the challenges of the new century through remote work. It also analyzes

the industries and jobs best-suited for remote technology adoption. Of course, remote technology is no silver bullet for solving business and social problems.

However, as Albert Einstein said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” In other words, organizations need to rework their objectives and business operations to benefit fully from remote technology. Otherwise, they will not be any more efficient, effective, or innovative than they were before adoption of the communications technology. Remote technology can, though, enable organizations of any size to tap into human resources around the world.

Remote work can blend the cultural diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and world views in untold ways. Creative and coordinated mixes of talent and skills can increase an organization’s ability to successfully tackle problems in ways previously unimaginable. But only if the teams that deploy the works are designed and managed as creative collaborations.

The alternative business model – hierarchical command-and-control structures – is proving uncreative and even downright destructive to the environment and social contracts. So in Chapter 2, I take the conventional idea of the team and reassemble the concept to work optimally in a remote environment.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the mechanics of developing a multicultural, international team in remote-first and hybrid contexts. Remote-first is a term professionals use to describe organizations that have no fixed geographical headquarters or places for physical workers to gather for their work. Hybrid organizations, on the other hand, have teams or operations that are housed under the same roof (or roofs).

The colocated groups use technology to coordinate activities with colleagues who typically work in isolation in other towns, cities, or countries. That is, the teams are “distributed,” another project term. Many of the stories and examples I share in this chapter are of both types of organization: remote and hybrid. Readers will find, however, that many of the practices I suggest in this chapter are also applicable in completely colocated circumstances. Chapter 3, though, drills down to the individual team member level.

I deal in Chapter 4 with the leadership skills involved in successfully running teams distributed across locations and time zones. The libertarian “your on your own, buddy” missive is wholly inadequate in sustaining a high-performing globalized team. Some of the most important capabilities of an international remote team leader is sympathy for herself and empathy for

remote team members. Sympathy helps a person recognize her limits; empathy enables one to register the limits of others. Empathy fills the vacuum that remote technologies create when people are engaging digitally.

Sympathy and empathy are important in remote contexts since people can be working anywhere, any time. The places and times of day and night that define working conditions may be exhausting, nerve wracking, and incredibly stressful. A fundamentally difficult aspect of remote international work for geographically distributed team members is dealing with the difference in time zones.

As a veteran of many battles with time itself, having worked in and from many countries at all hours of the day and night, I share the primary triggers for time zone burnout. It's a slippery slope I hope to help others avoid.

Chapter 5 – titled, *Out of Many Cultures, One Team* – explores the dynamics of cross-cultural engagements in depth. I use my own stories and interviews with collaborators around the world to unearth proven cross-cultural models and practices. I also admit mistakes I have made in my journey to untangle Babel-like business relationships. I've also set out in this chapter to move beyond Eurocentric models of international engagement.

For instance, I lived and worked in China for more than a decade. While there, I wrote and published two books about the country's culture, society, and technology. I also married into the culture and produced two wonderful children. The experiences have given me the wherewithal to dispel some of the more Euro-stereotypical views of China and other Asian countries. Chapter 5 provided me a platform from which to address other cross-cultural topics that academics and consultants to multinationals have woefully underserved: women and the minorities of nations.

I discuss in this chapter my utter disgust and astonishment at how the men of various cultures can and sometimes do treat women. I present comparative social measures to help hiring managers gauge the potential for such mistreatment on their international teams. And I identify additional measures to mitigate the risk of the mistreatment of minorities in cross-cultural contexts. Gender- and minority-treatment comparative measures should help organizations reduce the risk of reputational damage and disruption to operations. The final chapter of this book, Chapter 6, provides practical tips to mitigate those risks.

Ultimately, I hope *Virtually International* can be a guide and a handbook for those who suddenly find themselves immersed in the world through their

work. *Virtually International* is for those who are engaging and even managing people in other countries on a daily basis. Hopefully, you'll find the work is not only a worthwhile way to make a living, but an amazing way to craft a life.