

Making Long-Distance Partnerships Work

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Ben Finkel works in San Francisco for Fluther.com, the online knowledge sharing start-up that he co-founded. He and his partner, who works from Los Angeles, rely heavily on communications technology.

Technology makes it possible to run a business from practically anywhere on the planet. But what if your business partner lives in a different city or a different time zone? How do long-distance partners make it work?

The answer appears to be with lots of planning and smart use of technology. And even in the best long-distance arrangements, an old-fashioned in-person meeting now and then seems to reignite the spark.

Kathi Elster, an author and consultant who specializes in interpersonal relationships at work, says she has encountered many long-distance partnerships and never seen anyone break up over it.

"The frustration usually comes when there is a time difference, like if someone is in India or China, and the other has to be up in the middle of the night to communicate," Ms. Elster said. "You rely on e-mail, cannot do a lot of talking and the subtleties can get lost. So you do miss things."

Still, she says, these arrangements generally work, especially if the partners have a high level of trust in each other. "It's not going to work if one person has to fly out to see what is going on because the other isn't pulling their own weight," she added.

In early 2006, Ben Finkel and Andrew McClain, friends from Brown University, started Fluther.com, an online knowledge-sharing collective, when both were living in San Francisco. But Mr. McClain had plans to move to Los Angeles to pursue a side career in acting.

The two had some concerns about whether the business would survive Mr. McClain's move and dual career. So they included language in the initial draft of their partnership agreement protecting Mr. Finkel in the event Mr. McClain could not commit the necessary time to the business.

As it turned out, they abandoned those provisions by the time they completed their agreement because they were satisfied with how things were working out.

The subject of planning comes up often in talks with long-distance partners. "If you are a mature business person, you understand that a detailed communication structure is required

for success in any partnership, whether across the hall, across the room, or across the country," said Richard Sloan, who runs the small-business radio show and Web site, StartupNation, with his brother, Jeff. The Sloan brothers themselves are now putting that observation to a test.

After five years of running their company together out of a 3,500-square-foot office in Birmingham, Mich., Richard has just moved to San Francisco, a market that has become increasingly important to their business. They set up a regularly scheduled weekly telephone call. "And for a six-month period of time before my move, we ran the business this way even though we were both still in the same city," Mr. Sloan said.

Mr. McClain, who works out of his home in Los Angeles, and Mr. Finkel, who works in a co-working space in San Francisco, say they rely heavily on communications technology. But sometimes it can be a cause for frustration. "The problem is when the technology does not work," Mr. Finkel said. "When you really want to have a conversation, you can go from shoddy cell reception to iChat to Skype and none of them are working. At some points we would have been better with a landline from the 1950s."

The two say they prefer to be able to see each other when they converse and to share views of what is on each other's computer screens.

"We have probably been through about 20 communication tools," Mr. Finkel said. "In the old days, we used something called Bosco's Screen Share, but then Leopard, Mac's new operating system, came out with a snazzier version."

This technology raises some privacy issues, according to Mr. McClain and Mr. Finkel. So they have learned to be careful after a few instances of leaving the camera on and walking away from the computer without logging off. "Once, when Andrew forgot to turn off the camera and his girlfriend started typing, I could see her," Mr. Finkel said. "But she didn't have the headphones on so I couldn't tell her."

The partners say they value meeting in person. "Every three months or so, I will either go to San Francisco or Ben comes to Los Angeles and we recharge the battery of personal connection," Mr. McClain said.

Some partners see geographic distance as a boon. In 2000, while living in Orlando, Fla., Melinda Tomasello and Pamela Grimes started Originality Inc., a design firm specializing in custom and corporate gifts.

When Ms. Grimes's husband was transferred to Washington about a year and a half into their business, she moved, along with him and their two children. Ms. Grimes soon started joining organizations and attending trade shows in the Washington area, which opened a new market for Originality. "These are two big hot spots in the country, so it is great for us," Ms. Tomasello said.

The company has incurred modest costs, mostly in upgrading technology, to accommodate Ms. Grimes's relocation. But they say much of that might have happened had they remained in the same city since they had each always worked out of their own home offices. They say that two software tools have proved particularly helpful: Billingorchard.com to keep track of electronic billing and Quickbooks for accounts payable.

"With these programs, we can share information even though our computers are not networked," Ms. Grimes said. "We are just waiting for Quickbooks to add a feature to track all of the purchase orders. Right now we track those separately."

They have had some mishaps, mostly when items have been shipped to the wrong office. "We are very careful now when we order things to be very clear. "

Flying Cart, a company that provides tools for small businesses to create online stores, is run by three partners who live in different cities. The three founders all have connections to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, but only Mr. Beerman still lives in that city: Rishi Shah lives in Chicago, where he moved to pursue another job, and Margo Baxter, a triathlete lives in Austin to be near her trainer.

Mr. Shah says working remotely keeps them focused. "For a time, Margo and I worked side by side in Madison for a month in a half. We went to a coffee shop together and worked side by side each day. At first it was amazing. We were totally focused and totally pumped. But by the third week, we kept bugging each other and our productivity level went down. I am working on sales and she is working on development and when we work apart, we just get so much more done."

Still, there are challenges. "When you are starting up, you can get demoralized really quickly," Mr. Shah said. "When you're alone and frustrated, you don't always have an area to vent. That's why we have weekly meetings over Skype."

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