

## FOLLOW-THE-SUN

1. Follow-the-sun is a type of global workflow in which tasks are passed around daily between work sites that are many time zones apart. The “follow-the-sun” support model was originally developed to provide round-the-clock customer service and has by now been widely adopted by companies around the globe. Such a workflow is set up in order to reduce project duration and increase responsiveness. Thus, the work is “following the sun” and never stops. Yet whether and when to adopt this support model is a question just about every growing business comes to face.

2. In the early days of follow-the-sun, the approach only seemed feasible for large companies with multiple offices and teams of employees around the world. It turns out, however, that the method scales down to satisfy a specific goal: providing superior customer support. While that can mean different things for different companies, anyone who wants to provide 24 x 7 support 365 days of the year or more loosely, “anytime, anywhere” support—can adopt the model.

### Benefits

3. Both Follow the Sun and Remote Working models are for engineering design and software development. In each case the model was based on moving the work between sites in different time-zones/geographic locations and the results were mixed. Recently, the issue has come up again at work, as a result of a recent business acquisition and there have been numerous debates on how this might work.

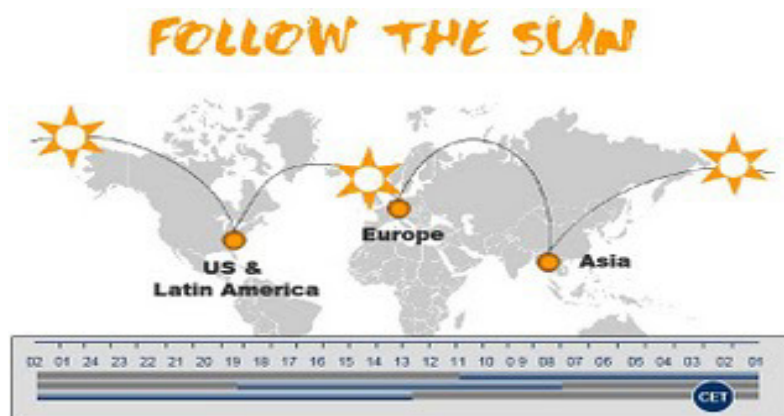


Fig. 1 : Follow The Sun Model

4. Potential Benefits. Under mentioned are the potential benefits:

(a) Reduced project delivery schedule / elapsed time (time to market). This is a clear benefit, but may result in higher overall projects costs compared to an equivalent project completed by a co-located team because of the additional communications overhead.

(b) Access to global resources at lower costs. This only becomes a valid cost saving in the case where the operating and labour costs are much lower, such as in locations like India or China. In my experience the additional cost of communicating requirements and changes on a daily basis erodes the labour cost savings for all but the simplest business problems. This is probably why call and support centres are able to function (maybe not well, but well enough) using this model.

(c) Facilitate and enhance international partnerships. The case for building international partnerships is only valid when there is an appropriate business motivation and therefore not valid in all cases – especially for outsourced projects. A valid example might be the case of a business acquisition and need to harmonise organisational culture and working practices.

(d) Leverage skills and experience across all sites. The potential to leverage a broader and/or deeper skill base is a valid benefit and can offer a business unique skills otherwise unavailable and therefore provide an important competitive advantage.

(e) Frequent peer checking leading to increased quality. Peer review is a valid benefit and consistent with agile principles, but assumes that the same task is being progressed at each site rather than simply being divided amongst the sites. Peer review can be achieved in many other ways but the turnaround time in this model is a real advantage.

(f) 24hr availability without shift working. Business functions that require 24hr availability, such as call or support centres, can benefit from this model. However these business functions rarely involve the task being passed from one time-zone or location to another and so the required communication and infrastructure is significantly reduced.

(g) Reduced software licensing costs. In certain situations the cost of software tools is a significant proportion of the project costs. This is often true for specialised engineering tools (particularly CAD(Computer Aided Design), FEA(Finite Element Method) and CFD(Computational Fluid Dynamics)). When software licensing permits, there is a potential opportunity to share the license costs over more than one time zone thereby reducing the total number of licenses required.

## 5. **Potential Costs**

(a) Reduced customer contact and engagement software development and engineering design typically suffer when customer contact is reduced. However, there are instances when the constraint of limited customer contact has the effect of focusing the communication and ensuring that the limited time is used effectively. Communication can also be enhanced with web-based project management tools such as Base camp or Unfuddle.

(b) Increased infrastructure complexity needed to facilitate data sharing information security policies typically restrict the sharing of company data

across the open internet. As a result, additional infrastructure is needed to secure access to private networks.

(c) Higher start-up costs associated with resource allocation. The additional complexity and communication overhead associated with making the necessary resource available for a project typically increases the start-up costs.

6. Follow the Sun model along with its features is depicted below:-

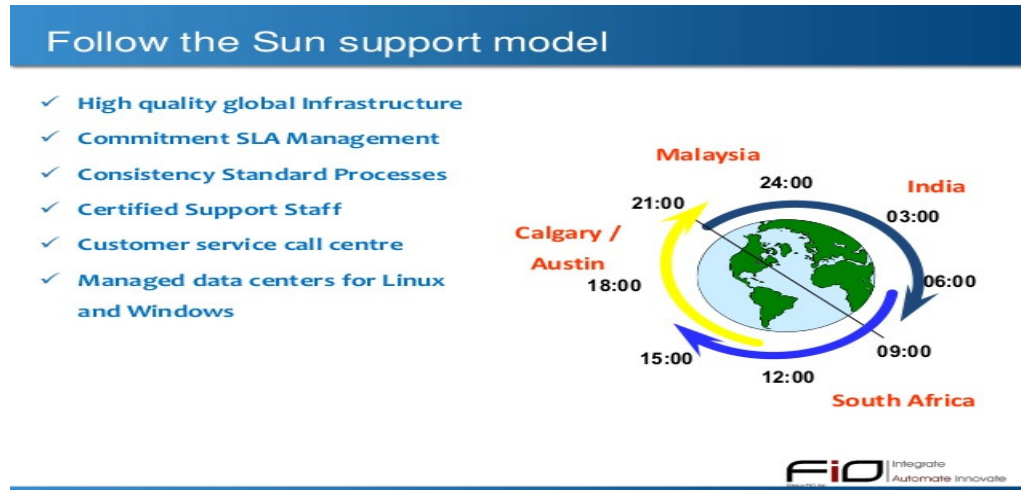


Fig. 2: Features of Follow The Sun

7. **Making an Objective Decision**: If there is a small company looking to provide global support, consider what steps it can take now to achieve longer-term support goals. This can be done by evaluating, who all are its customers, how to meet them and where they are. Nobody want to open multiple offices, especially at first, but perhaps a small remote office or a representative located remotely in a key area or time zone may satisfy customers' needs. Hence, few factors which will affect the decision would be:

(a) **Clear business objectives**. It is important to be clear about why a Follow the Sun or Remote working model is being considered. In the present case, when we began to discuss the issue in detail it was unclear if we were;

- (i) attempting to create a global development team, or
- (ii) trying to maximize the opportunities to share developed software or
- (iii) trying to forge stronger links between the two businesses.

(b) **Challenge the assumption that costs will be reduced** The advancement in communication technology has somewhat fuelled the hype around global teams and working practices. Despite this enthusiasm, the benefits can only be realised in certain situations and therefore it is important to challenge the benefits to ensure they are achievable.

(c) Peak Oil and travel costs. The case for remote working and less onsite travel will strengthen as the cost of travel increases. This will probably result in more emphasis on local resources, however the advances in communication could counter this effect.

8. Conclusion. India is a half day ahead of the U.S. and it isn't easy to hold conference calls or to schedule interviews at a time that's convenient on both sides of the planet. It might seem clever to setup a "follow the sun" business support model but reality sets in rather quickly when that model falls short of actually working. Business continuity and convenience are more important than a few theoretical dollars saved by using those far shore resource locations.