

Penny: Welcome to the Virtual Working Summit. I'm Penny Pullan. I'm your host for the calls in the Virtual Working Summit. This Virtual Working Summit is also the virtual launch for my newly published book "Virtual Leadership: Practical Strategies for Getting the Best Out of Virtual Work and Virtual Teams." If you'd like to see a list of all the speakers and their topics, then please visit virtualworkingsummit.com.

Today I'm really delighted to be interviewing EviProkopi, who's a Greek millennial tapping into global opportunities. She's featured in chapter 9 of my book. You can see her story on page 220 if you have a copy. Evi is someone who's grasped the possibilities of virtual working and used them to transform her own life. She lives in Greece where, at the time of the Summit, the economy is suffering. Evi uses virtual working to grasp opportunities not available in Greece at present. As a project management consultant, she runs projects for clients all over the world as well as supervising Australian students in project management. We met earlier in the year when we were both chosen to present at the Project Management Institute Global Congress. We presented together a workshop on virtual project teams in Barcelona, and I thought I really should bring her to the Summit.

First of all, Evi, I'd like to thank you for all your help with my book and also with the Global Congress session.

Evi: It was my pleasure working with you and learning from you.

Penny: Mine too. I'm really pleased to welcome you here to the Virtual Working Summit.

Evi: Thank you for having me here.

Penny: Evi, at the start, could you tell us a little bit about what you do and how you got to do it?

Evi: Sure. It all started about nine years ago when I ran my own online translation agency. Back then I was managing multilingual projects for several clients. Then, one day I saw an ad on a job board where they required project management assessors on a freelance basis. I applied there, I was trained, and ended up supervising and assessing people pursuing a diploma in project management.

Currently, I also teach a seminar in project management on an ad-hoc basis here in Athens, and I work as a project management consultant for a variety of clients.

Penny: Super. You say you worked on multi-lingual projects. It might be interesting to people just to understand how many different languages you speak, because you certainly put me to shame, Evi.

Evi: I speak English, French, Italian, some Finnish, and Russian, and I'm a native Greek speaker.

Penny: Incredible. I'm impressed. I supposed we ought to move onto the questions that have come in from participants. The first question I have is an amalgamation of several people's questions. It is: 'How do you find your clients all over the world?'

Evi: I think the formula is about 80% work, 10% patience, and 10% luck. When I ran my translation business, I would approach companies and make offers. Initially several were declined. However, one of my clients was a Fortune 100 company and they decided to hire translators on a full time basis, so I had to find translators native to a plethora of languages for them and then manage their projects. Having a reference from a company like this helped me find more clients and improve my success rate.

Penny: I'm sure it did. That sounds pretty impressive having a Fortune 100 company as your client. Super. Somebody, in fact, Axel from California in the United States, has asked: 'In my experience, many place of freelance, and work, and virtual projects, are seen as fillers, and often paid badly. Do you see rates in the \$75 per hour range, or what can be expected?'

Evi: While rates of \$75 per hour are common in California for project management, you need to consider the rate in other countries as well. For example, the hourly rate for project management in Greece, is \$9 per hour.

Penny: Really?

Evi: Yeah.

Penny: Nine dollars?

Evi: Yes. You see. Everything is relative.

Penny: Absolutely. In France?

Evi: In France, the rate, is about \$20 per hour.

Penny: Interesting.

Evi: The rates vary accordingly and there are a lot of parameters to consider such as the complexity of a project, it's urgency, and the client's location.

Penny: Hmm. Wow, so you're juggling all these different rates as well as all these other things as well.

Evi: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Penny: A follow up question is: 'How do you find and recruit your teams of freelancers while you're juggling all these different things?'

Evi: Well, it's all based on the project requirements. I may need to contact hundreds of freelancers on generic and specific freelancer networking sites: LinkedIn, Meetups, or through my contacts. I will then make a shortlist with people who meet the requirements. I will certainly talk to them, check their CVs and any work samples if

relevant, and their references to see who fits best.

Penny: Your virtual project team is what I referred to in the book as a star group, with a central hub, ie: you. Then you connect to all the different team members who don't necessarily all interact with each other. What are your top tips for working with teams of people when they all communicate with you as the project's hub?

Evi: Well as we had mentioned during our workshop in Barcelona, top tips are to be visible and build trust. In star group, this is actually slightly easier because you communicate with each team member. The key is to add a face and a voice whenever possible in order to establish a connection with greater involvement. Additionally, built professional relationships with every team member so you can understand who they are and how they can help with project issues and challenges.

You should listen to people's concerns and help them overcome any problems they face with a project. You can have daily five minute video calls with each team member and get to know them. Find out their interests and their goals. Discussing things like this can help you determine whether they can provide more to the project than you initially expected.

Penny: It's interesting your focus on video because that really builds a richness of the connection, doesn't it?

Evi: Exactly. Out of sight and out of mind. If they don't see you, they forget about you.

Penny: Absolutely.

Evi: Once you establish some level of trust with each team member, it's a good idea to introduce informal communication between the project's team members that will bond the team. Co-located teams have some informal small talk at the water cooler and this can be transferred to the virtual workspace as well so that team members can interact on a regular basis, bond, and become part of the organization.

We can do this by creating a virtual water cooler: Keep an online open communication, like a chat room, for team members to just hang out. You may notice that in the beginning some team members may feel a little shy, but once things get going, they will enjoy it.

Penny: Certainly once things get going. I know sometimes I've had teams where I've created something but nothing happens.

Evi: You mean that nothing happened in the chat room, or what?

Penny: It just is a very quiet area – not much chat at all!

Evi: Yes, you may need to be the speaker in the beginning. Just start conversations and then people will start replying and get to know each other.

Penny: Be proactive, I suppose, is your hint in that one?

Evi: Yes, exactly.

Penny: Super. I've got a question from Andrew in the Netherlands. He says in some cultures, particularly French speaking countries, he feels like he's the enemy so to speak, until the ice is finally broken and the relationship is built. Achieving this, Andy says, requires countless face to face meetings and socials. What's the best way to overcome this when working virtually?

Evi: Yes. This ties to the previous question about building trust.

Get to know other people's cultures and norms. Some people need more time to trust someone. Find out about their working habits. Spend some time to form a virtual bond. You may think you sacrifice some efficiency now, but this will certainly turn to effectiveness later.

Penny: Absolutely.

Evi: Remember to be visible and plan everything around your virtual presence. Be consistent and understand the tone of your voice and how clearly your messages get across. Of course, be willing to ask for feedback.

Penny: Okay. I've been asking a few people this week this question: If you could change one thing about virtual working, what would that be?

Evi: Hmm, just one thing?

Penny: Just one thing, and imagine it's magic. You can wave a wand and make whatever change you want!

Evi: I would certainly cancel time zones. I think the key thing is to understand and respect each other's cultural differences. It's hard to know other people's traditions, bank holidays, or working hours, but once you get to know them, virtual working is easier and less stressful.

Penny: Absolutely. Louise from the UK says she's interested in learning how people manage multicultural conversations virtually, especially when there's no visual or social context to remind us when we are online of the different cultural norms in terms of behaviour, attitude, etc. We could assume our communication is clear, only to find out that half of the attendees have heard but not really engaged with what was being said.

Evi: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Virtual team meetings are the means to create an increased engagement from all team members on a regular basis and in case of ineffective meetings, productivity's usually affected. We need to keep our meetings short so people stay focused and don't zone out. We should strive for a dialogue instead of long

monologues and verify that everyone can hear well. Perhaps we need to, sometimes we need to mute people, if there is too much noise from their line. We also need to call on people by their names and ask everyone questions to engage them. Finally, use short sentences and avoid slang and cultural references that we don't get misunderstood.

Penny: Absolutely. I could even add in something else, which is, ask people to confirm back what they've heard so that you know that the message has got across clearly as well. Okay. Evi, we have got to the end of our slot. How can people contact you if they'd like to get in touch with you? Perhaps they might like to use your skills of creating these freelance teams. What is the best way of getting in touch with you?

Evi: Well I have both a LinkedIn and a project management profile. They can also email me at evi@skemaprojects.com and my website is currently under construction.

Penny: Super. Evi, we could go on for hours but this is the end of our slot now, so thank you so much for your answers. I'm sure that people listening in today have found some inspiration and some tips that they can use.

Evi: Mm-hmm (affirmative) hopefully.

Penny: They have quite a lot to think about.

Evi: Thank you very much for this interesting conversation.

Penny: Thank you, and thank you too, for everyone for listening right through to the end of this session. If you have to miss any sessions, or you'd like to listen again, you can upgrade to get permanent access to all the sessions. This year, we throw a copy of the book in as a bonus. Do have a look at www.virtualworkingsummit.com upgrade for details. Until next time, bye.