In a world of unprecedented levels of digital communication, why is co-location still often the best way to collaborate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technological advances are making communicating with our colleagues in different locations increasingly easy. For most of us, instant messaging, screen sharing and video calls are fast becoming the norm and online meetings can be held in a virtual office with attendees dialling in from around the globe. However, there are situations where co-location can still be the best way to collaborate, particularly for effective Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) coordination.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Details can be overheard and ad hoc conversations with the project engineers, who can be a matter of seats away, can allow questions and concerns to be worked through there and then. What could have taken days can take minutes and the outcome is likely to be a better-informed assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many large infrastructure projects are currently being developed by multi-disciplinary, multi-organisation teams that include engineers, planners, EIA coordinators and environmental disciplines to name a few. Co-locating these skills in a project office can bring substantial benefits to the EIA process and help ensure that the project is consented and constructed having taken into account an optimal balance of drivers. Decisions can be made more quickly, knowledge and understanding is easier to share, and relationships can prosper in a ‘de-badged’ environment.

Whilst these benefits apply to all stages of the EIA process, one particular example relates to the design freeze. It may be found that an EIA coordinator who is remote from the project team is issued project drawings by email but the options for how the design would be constructed may not be clear. Yet, when working in the same office, design reviews and construction workshops are easier to organise and attend and risks can be understood and managed more quickly.

Additionally, that design freeze may have been reached with limited or no environmental input yet the resulting assessment identifies significant effects that the client then looks to try and design out. With an EIA coordinator embedded into the project team, earlier and more effective collaboration between the design, construction and environment teams could have completed this iteration before the design freeze, saving time and cost.

The collaboration resulting from a co-located team can also help with forming the project’s mitigation requirements. Regular mitigation workshops and discussions can be held, with all involved around the table, to ensure that the proposals are fit-for-purpose and cost-effective. The scenario whereby a mitigation measure for one topic has adverse implications for another can be quickly identified and resolved, whereas communicating these requirements digitally can be time-consuming with many individual conversations required to make progress.

Not only does working in a co-located environment maximise collaboration and improve the EIA process, but benefits can also be realised by the parties involved.
The challenge of working in a co-located arrangement can be a valuable career development opportunity for the individual concerned, whilst the employer will benefit from the experiences and skills learnt through such close collaboration. From a commercial point of view, a successful co-location can grow the relationship between the two organisations and further opportunities to collaborate often become apparent.

However, there are inevitably some downsides to co-location. Individuals can struggle to settle in to the organisational culture of the project team and the project team may feel uncomfortable with an individual being brought in, thereby risking the benefits of collaboration for the EIA coordinator. Working in a full-time co-located role will mean that the individual does not experience the variety that is often typical of working at a consultancy and the employer will lose an individual from the business.

That said, the downsides are considered to be far outweighed by the substantial advantages that good collaboration can deliver. Like many other major multidisciplinary consultancies AECOM has experience of co-locating individuals into project teams and, with the government’s continued commitment to delivering infrastructure improvements, this requirement is likely to increase. The following checklist provides a few tips for anyone who is considering such an opportunity.

1. Be clear on who will manage you on a day-to-day basis and who retains overall control. Who is responsible for your office and site safety, personal development and appraisal?

2. Ensure that the project team knows who you are and what you do, as this will undoubtedly enhance collaboration. Presenting at project team meetings or lunch and learn sessions can be a good way to get yourself known.

3. Stay in touch with your home organisation – join team meetings where possible and attend social events. Line managers should be active in keeping up contact with co-located team members.

4. Seek clarity on how the co-located working arrangement will end. Where practicable, end dates should be agreed, or sufficient notice provided, to ensure that your return is as smooth as possible.

John Johnson, AECOM, April 2017.

For access to more EIA articles, case studies and hundreds of non-technical summaries of Environmental Statements visit:
http://www.iema.net/eia-quality-mark/