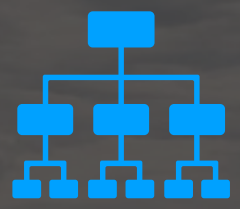

BUILDING AND LEADING REMOTE TEAMS

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

DistantJob
REMOTE RECRUITMENT AGENCY

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WORK IS CHANGING
CHANGE IS WORK

What was the world like, ten years ago? What was the workplace like? Who were the disruptors back then? Who were the established players? Not the ones we have today, that's who. The innovators who embrace change and are able to capitalize on it own the world.

We are living in the age of change. Work is no exception. Principles might be intemporal, but the ways in which you apply them for best effect keep on shifting. That's a theme throughout this book. Some things that where key to building a world-class business ten years ago - to take good care of your people, to focus on goals and KPIs instead of time at the office, to take the time to find the best person for the job - still hold water today.

However, applying those principles in a world that is blurring the line between the virtual and the physical demands new approaches. Less and less, taking care of your people means a good pay check and dental benefits. Less and less, top talent is willing to relocate to live close to your headquarters. And how should you measure the productivity of employees that are working on a different company?

Years of working with a team that's distributed from Canada to Armenia forced us to find answers to those questions, and many others. What you now hold in your hands is the distillation of years of study and trial-and-error. We hope it will be of use to you in your journey.

Live long and prosper!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

SHARON KOIFMAN

believes every company should have access to world's top talent. That's why he used over 10 years of experience in tech industry recruitment & HR to create DistantJob. His unique recruitment model allows DistantJob's clients to get high quality IT experts working remotely within two weeks, and at reduced cost. Sharon originated and experimented with the majority of the ideas and principles in this book, passing them down to his team. This book is, in essence, a distillation of his management experience.

LUÍS MAGALHÃES

is the editor-in-chief at DistantJob Blog. He writes about how to build and manage remote teams, and the benefits of hiring remote workers, and been managing editorial teams remotely for the past 15 years, and training teammates to do so for nearly as long. Conducting interviews with Sharon and over a dozen other specialists on remote leadership outside of DistantJob, he collected and outlined the tools, tips and strategies showcased in each chapter of this book.

CASEY SHULL | RIA GHOSE | SARAH DIXON | TINA SUCIU

Casey, Ria and Sarah tirelessly researched about and fact-checked every single piece of advice in the book, and contributed with writing for large sections. They were also responsible for all the case studies and citations that support the material.

Tina was the driving force behind the writing of the book, reading each piece of content, selecting the ones that made the cut, and developing the outline of what you now hold in your hands.

I - MANAGING CHANGE

As you start to employ some remote workers, you'll want your in-office employees to welcome them into the team, provide them the tools necessary to work with their remote colleagues and make sure they have your support during this period of transition. Let's look at how to plan a changeover that ensures all this and with minimal disruption to your actual work.

"CHANGE IS THE LAW OF LIFE AND THOSE WHO LOOK ONLY TO THE PAST OR PRESENT ARE CERTAIN TO MISS THE FUTURE." —JOHN F. KENNEDY

Human beings tend to create stasis and stick to it. Nevertheless, the status quo is a growth inhibitor in business. That's part of why you've decided to embrace a new way of working - remotely. Right?

Still, you might be wondering how to prep your organisation for your new remote workers, how will your existing employees react to this decision…and how will all this change affect your business.

It's understandable you'll face resistance from your current employees. They may be afraid of several things – like how they'll be expected to adapt, what new things they'll have to learn, what kind of people they'll work with, how their work will change… and so on. And if you fail to handle the change process strategically, you face two major problems.

First, a pushback from your current employees that ultimately leads to compromised work from their end. After all, Newton's third law of motion—for every action (force) in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction—applies just as much to humans as it does inanimate objects.

And second, a failure of the whole initiative of hiring remotely. This, of course, means a significant loss in savings and other opportunities for your company.

Specifically, if you're hiring remotely for the first time and are onboarding many such employees concurrently, you cannot merely spring the changes on to your current employees and expect their cooperation.

Instead, you'll want to follow a charted course that minimizes disruptions to your actual work. So that while you bring remote employees on, your team's productivity and happiness, as well as your company's success and growth, don't suffer.

LEVELS OF CHANGE ASSOCIATED WITH HIRING REMOTE WORKERS

For an established company with employees working from the same office, remote hiring will have repercussions at the individual, initiative, and enterprise levels.

Individual Level Change: This concerns the people who will work directly with your remote hires, every day. Such as project members and direct managers. The change will naturally "hit them the hardest." Meaning they'll have to learn to work with colleagues who aren't present in the same office. So they may feel that the remote colleague is only a

perfunctory team member. They may also feel "begrudged" to have to learn new ways of doing things, especially because of someone else. The best way to counteract the resistance from your current employees is to be open with them, engage them in the entire process, and make it beneficial for them. An appropriate benefit, in this case, could be allowing your current employees to telecommute part-time.

Initiative Level Change: This concerns how the actual work will change given that a part of the team is now working remotely. We will delve more into this in just a bit. But consider how some internal processes have to change to make room for the remote staff. Let's say a few members of a project talk about a problem over lunch and come up with a solution. Where will the remote team members fit into this? They'll merely get "told what was decided" without getting a chance to participate in the discussion? Measures need to be taken to have those discussions online where everyone can get involved.

Enterprise Level Change: How will your entire company and its policies change due to remote hiring? How will payroll, HR, and other teams work differently to accommodate this change? How many of the initiative-level modifications will you also implement in the rest of your company? (Say, you're using a remote project management tool for your remote employees, will other teams use the same tool?)

GUIDELINES FOR TACKLING THE CHANGE OF WORKING WITH REMOTE TEAM MEMBERS

While the changes every company has to go through when hiring remote staff will vary, here's a look at the more ubiquitous issues to remember:

- **Acceptance:** Once you've decided to hire remote employees, you'll have to let your current employees "come to terms" with this change. Instead of forcing your ideas on them, let them come up to speed on their terms. Involve them in a discussion to find out what their concerns might be. What kind of benefit they see themselves enjoying because of this change. What kind of incentives they may seek and you might be able to provide. Find common ground that'll make this change palatable for all concerned.

- **Planning and Readiness:** Getting ready to welcome remote workers into the fold entails more than dealing with logistics. Each of the next steps will require you to make some decisions about how your employees will interact. Have a written plan,

differentiate between “must-do” and “recommendation”, and deliver it to everyone before the new employees start.

- **Culture:** While most people pay lip-service to the importance of culture in the workplace, most neglect it to adverse effects. Intellectual diversity can be a jumping point for new ideas and growth. But especially if your remote hire is from another part of the globe (and why shouldn’t they be?), your existing employees will have to learn a bit more about other cultures. Sharing and learning about new cultures should be a two-way street.

- **Training/Support:** Depending on how much procedural changes your company will implement, it’ll necessitate training and support options for your current employees (as well as new ones). If you’re adopting new technology, for instance, you’ll have to hold a learning session to make sure everyone is on the same page.

- **Communication:** Your entire team will have to communicate in such a way that every change in a project, every new idea, every discussion is documented for all to access. In case the present team is unaccustomed to this level of communication, set out a plan for all to follow. This will add structure and form to team communications so that no one is left out of important messages.

- **Tools and Technologies:** Figure out what kind of new tools you’ll need to work with distributed teams. From communications tools (like Skype and Zoom) to work management (Trello) to time monitoring (Hubstaff) – there are many options. But whichever you choose, make sure everyone on the team knows how to use them.

- **Time Zones and Turnarounds:** Working with a newly distributed team often means having to change pace to accommodate different time zones. Depending on where your remote employees are located you may experience delays in response times. So make room in your schedule for different turnaround times, when to assign work, and when to get your entire team together for meetings and hangouts.

(It is, by the way, totally fine to mandate that your remote employees work during your timezone work-hours - so long as they know in advance that’s what they’re signing up for.)

- **Review/Monitor:** As with any change, you’ll have to monitor how your current team is adjusting to working with remote colleagues. If some practices are entirely new to them, they might slip into old ways of doing things. That’s why include checks and measures to prevent slip-backs.

That hiring remote employees is right for your business is not a debate. However, it's also human to resist change – like an undertow to a tide. The thing is companies often tend to follow Newton's first law – they persist in uniform motion unless an external force acts upon them.

Remote work is changing the work landscape copiously. Either your company uses its momentum to jump onto the next level, or it gets left behind. Managing the changes that come with remote hiring – well, that's just details of a winning plan.

II - PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE VIRTUAL OFFICE

How to plan a meeting between several local and remote employees? What's the best way to track their productivity? To assign tasks? To make sure they are talking to each other? Settle down. We know there are a lot of questions to be answered. That's what this chapter is about: laying the groundwork to successfully operate a fully- or partly-remote business.

"IT TAKES TWO FLINTS TO MAKE A FIRE." – LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

HOW TO CHAIR A REMOTE TEAM MEETING

Of all the tasks a remote team manager is asked to do, hosting remote team meetings could be considered the most challenging. First, there's the issue of scheduling which can cause headaches with a distributed team. Then when you've got everyone together, you have the various challenges that even the most reliable technology can bring. And on top of that, there are all the 'normal' things you have to think about to chair a great meeting.

There are lots of tools that can help you to host an excellent meeting; scheduling tools to relieve the headache of different time zones, and video chat applications to name just a few. If you want to chair a successful remote meeting, you'll have chosen tools that can support your success.

You might also find yourself with participants for whom English is not a first language, or that don't speak it at all. But don't fear, we have some tips to help you. Soon, you'll be chairing remote team meetings like a boss. *(That's pronounced "like a BAAAAWWWWSE", by the way.)*

SUCCESS IS 90% PREPARATION

But do try and avoid the 10% perspiration when you're on camera. This adage is especially true when you're hosting a remote team meeting. If you invest time and thought in planning, you can prevent most of the problems you might experience, or as Louis Pasteur put it, 'Chance favors the prepared mind.'

THE TECHNICAL STUFF

It might sound like stating the obvious, but make sure you check in advance that any pieces of equipment and software that you want to use are working. (We'll let you know our favorites in a few pages.) By in advance, I mean 24 to 48 hours ahead of the meeting, not with 5 minutes to spare. If you're doing something new, like screen sharing or running a presentation, have a rehearsal, so you're familiar with the controls.

When you send out the meeting invitation, ask all the attendees to do the same thing. Whichever tool you're using, they're bound to have a test meeting or a way that your team can make sure they can see and be seen, hear and be heard before the big day.

AGENDAS AND DOCUMENTATION

When you send out the meeting invitation, ask for any additions to the agenda. Email again in advance of the meeting, including the agenda and any other supporting documentation your participants need to read – and make sure they have enough time to read it!

One tip that can help remote meetings to flow more efficiently is to dispense with 'reporting back.' Although it works well enough in a face-to-face meeting, it's a lot harder to take the focus when you're talking to a camera. One alternative to this is to have people send in written reports that can go out with the meeting pack, and the give everyone the opportunity to comment or ask questions during the meeting. It makes it feel more conversational and natural.

For team members who speak English as a second language, it is a good idea to send out some notes about critical topics. Alternatively, a glossary which helps them to define unfamiliar words can be useful. As part of proper remote team etiquette, asking everyone to avoid slang and colloquialisms is a good idea.

START WITH THE SOCIALS

Meetings are one of those rare times when you can get your distributed team together at the same time, so make the most of it. Don't just think of it as an occasion to talk business and get through the agenda, it's also valuable team bonding time.

Set aside some time at the beginning of the meting to chat, just as you would if you were sat in a meeting room waiting for everyone to turn up. As chair, you can help the conversation to flow, and give your team something to talk about. This is also an excellent opportunity to mention any birthdays or personal milestones and celebrate them together.

PROFESSIONALISM IS EVERYTHING

Digital nomads can work from anywhere, but when it comes to a team meeting, you do need a certain amount of professionalism. Noisy coffee shops or crowded co-working spaces might not be the best locations to dial into a conference call; especially if you're talking about confidential matters. So make clear to your participants that they need to take part from somewhere sensible.

You can set the tone yourself, by making sure that your background is clear of any clutter. Neutral works best, but you can add that note of corporate sensitivity by displaying a logo or some branded products. It just helps reinforce the idea that you're here to do business.

REMEMBER THE VISUALS

Most video conferencing tools give you the ability to share more than just your webcam feed. You can show presentations, screen share, or bring up a remote collaboration tool and have everyone work on it together. In some ways, it's easier to get your team to work together on things in a remote meeting.

Another bonus that you have is the option to record the meeting, and place it online for later viewing. Not only does that mean you can double check what was said, but even those who couldn't get to the meeting 'in person' can see what happened.

CHECK THAT EVERYONE IS PARTICIPATING

On the subject of participation, just like in a face-to-face meeting one of the jobs of the chair is to let everyone have a chance to speak. Although remote workers come from all personality types, it's introverts who tend to gravitate to remote roles the most. Introverts may not find it easy to break into an ongoing conversation to say something, but there's an excellent chance that what they're going to say is useful.

When key points are being discussed, take the time to go through all those present and ask them if they have any questions or comments to share. This is particularly true if there are any roadblocks in the way of progress; a trouble shared is a trouble halved, and all that.

FINISH WITH WATER COOLER CHAT

Have you ever noticed how a lot of the business of a meeting happens when people start leaving? There are those who stay behind to ask questions they didn't raise at the time. Or a couple of people grab a coffee and start talking something over, and come up with a new idea. In remote meetings, you don't get that 'water cooler' time.

So you need to make it happen. Once the business of the meeting is concluded, stay in work mode for a while and just let your team talk things over. Ask questions, discuss what was said, make sure that everyone left the meeting with the same impressions on situations or approaches.

And then when that's done? Just chat. Anyone who needs to rush off can go, but for those who have a free five minutes, just use it to chat.

LESSONS IN CONVERSATION: HOW TO USE ASYNCHRONOUS CHAT

Email, Slack, and Skype – in large part, it's thanks to these technological advances that your staff can now work remotely.

Communication is the gateway to maintaining balance, stability, and success within your remote team. A crack in how everyone interacts is a crack in the foundation of the team.The added stress that comes from the need to communicate asynchronously in remote teams threatens this foundation. But good communication is still possible. Let's explore how:

THE STRUGGLE FOR SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

Unlike asynchronous communication, synchronous communication can be difficult for employees working remotely. It's arguably the hardest challenge facing remote workers. Asynchronous work allows people the freedom of responding when it's convenient. And it may even be a benefit because it provides a time frame for a thought out response.

But with so many workers in different time zones (a blessing and a curse), managers have a harder time. Being able to sort out a time that allows everyone to be present for conference calls and office meetings is hard. More often than not, remote employees are made to "share the burden of inconvenience."

This expression is management-speech for taking turns meeting when it's inconvenient. It's an approach that allows for the burden of a late night or early morning to not fall too often to one group of people.

It's not a perfect solution. But making sure that each member isn't sacrificing too much personal time is one way to help ease the burden. Another is to make sure each meeting is important, and not something that could be discussed over email. Keep in mind that synchronous communication may happen in chat rooms as well.

The willingness for all involved to be flexible and make allowances to accommodate others is also key. If only a few time zones are involved, look for an overlap when everyone is working. This narrow band of time is where meeting times (whether video/audio or chat) should fall, thus minimising interruptions outside work time.

Luckily, asynchronous communication will be the norm for most remote workers.

APP (A)SYNCHRONISATION

In order for all team members to be able to speak asynchronously with each other, they need to be using the same apps. Take the time to make sure that overseas and statewide remote workers are in sync. You should be primarily focused on figuring out the best tools to use company-wide. RedHat's OpenSource blog suggests:

"THE FIRST THING YOU NEED TO ENABLE ASYNCHRONOUS DECISION-MAKING IS A CENTRAL ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATIONS CHANNEL. THE TECHNOLOGY YOU USE MUST ENABLE ALL TEAM MEMBERS TO GET THE SAME INFORMATION AND HOLD THREADED DISCUSSIONS(...)"

This will make communication easier for remote members who are in different time zones. Those employees will feel like they're absorbing all the right information and are on the same page as everyone else in the company. Team harmony and success will follow.

There is, however, no “one-size fits all” approach. Slack is the default choice, but we encourage you to experiment. As all tools have their pros and cons, you need to test drive them through your process, and conversely, see what each app’s adoption would force you to modify in your process. Its possible to fully manage a company through an online forum or email treads, but to do so while keeping everyone on the same page, you need to outline a clear structure of how to participate. That being said, we’d be remiss if we didn’t include a couple of points about each of the more popular solutions, to help you hit the ground running.

Chat has the advantage that it’s ignorable. If a message comes in and your developer is ‘in the zone’ then they don’t need to stop what they’re doing and respond. They can check the chat window when they have the time.

It’s also a great medium to get multiple points of view. While you don’t want everyone talking at once in a regular meeting, it really doesn’t matter if you get answers from everyone involved via chat. In fact, it can be a good way to get several different approaches to a problem.

And chat software is also the perfect way to have a ‘virtual water cooler’. A place where your team can go to shoot the breeze, share the things that are important to them and crack jokes. So, here’s the skinny on the best chat programs for remote teams.

A SHORT NOTE ON HOW TO USE CHAT

Think of text-based chat applications as leaving an answering machine message for someone. It’s a message that you can send instantly, and if that person has the time to look at it then, you’ll get an instant response. If they’re tied up with other tasks then you might have to wait a while for a response.

Instant messenger isn’t just for remote staff either; you may find that once you start using it to talk to your remote team that you want to use it to talk to nearby colleagues too. It can be a quicker way to get a query resolved than by going to someone’s desk and waiting for an answer in real time.

On a side note, you should set up a dedicated room for non-business-related chatting in whatever app you choose. This gives your virtual employees an opportunity to get to know one another on a personal level.

By giving your group this opportunity, it'll create a water cooler effect and help eliminate the loneliness that many virtual workers experience during the day. Social connections are important, so let your team laugh and cry together, and you'll discover how well they work together after they get to know one another on a personal level.

Slack

This is the collaboration tool that we've used for many years at DistantJob. We love it because you can assign channels and let the right team members be part of them. It helps to keep conversations about particular projects 'tidy' rather than having to look through the history to find one comment in dozens.

Team members can join and leave channels as they wish, so if you need some input from sales just invite them to join. They can stay as long as needed and then leave the channel before the technical detail bogs them down too much.

Slack also supports file sharing and integrates with many of the popular tools that remote teams are using such as: Google Drive, Dropbox, Trello, Asana, Salesforce and more. In fact, Slack supports over 1500 different apps. It's also available on iOS and Android devices. That's just a few of the features that makes Slack a popular choice for remote teams.

Skype

Skype is best known for its video conferencing capabilities, but of course, it also offers an instant messenger function. Group Chat allows you to invite up to 25 people to take part in the conversation. Where Skype has the advantage is that it's a widely used app, so contacting even people outside your organisation shouldn't be a problem. The downside is that it doesn't have a lot of the refinements that the other packages do, for example having permanent groups or channels. Skype works, but there are better products.

Basecamp

We've since moved from Slack to Basecamp, because it combines most of what makes Slack great with a full suite of project management tools that fit perfectly into our processes. The main differentiator when it comes to chat is that Basecamp doesn't show when people are online or not, actually discouraging real-time conversation. It is a tool best suited for companies who privilege a culture of deep work and want to minimize distractions, but not as good as helping develop a sense of community and camaraderie.

REAPING THE BENEFITS

Like the keystone in a building, communication is the starting point for a a remote company's communication. When a well structured set up is in place, the employer is not the only one who benefits – remote employees will also have the confidence they need.

They'll know that they are up-to-date with critical information each time they sit down to work, whether they're working from a far off island in New Zealand or sitting in a high rise in New York.

TRY DIFFERENT PROJECT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS UNTIL YOU FIND A FIT

You should have a project management system whether you have a small team or a large virtual organisation. By keeping everything together under one "roof", your team will stay organised, all of your conversations and documents will be in the same place, and nothing will accidentally get lost in cyberspace. Picture the PMS as the "glue" that keeps all moving parts of your company - conversations, scheduling, documents - together. It's the *de facto* virtual office.

Some teams attempt to do everything by email, and this is a disorganised and unmanageable disaster just waiting to happen.

Good places to start are Trello (which was used for many years by both DistantJob as a company and several of the people at DistantJob for their own personal projects and side-hustles), Asana, and Basecamp - our current pick. The former is less structured, working almost as a virtual post-it board, while the latter two have more structured, pre-set workflows.

TRACKING HOURS VS PRODUCTIVITY

If you aren't tracking employee productivity numbers, you'll find it nearly impossible to run your business with full efficiency. You need to know this information to know how to bill your clients, how to pay your virtual employees, and how to project future receivables.

Tracking employee time and hours is not crucial to your business, it is more just one of the options. And there are a few excellent options readily available online, should you wish to go down that path.

We're more of a KPI (Key Productivity Indicator) mentality. Meaning, every quarter we set goals, both individually and as a team, on our project management system. Then, we break those down into weekly steps with measurable output. Most tasks can be measured by deliverables; on the ones that can't, we go with the honor system. Every month, we see how everyone is doing, and if there are any noticeable slumps, we ask "why" with an attitude to help people improve. And it is worth pointing out than in many cases, it's not that people are not productive, but that they overestimate their productivity and commit to doing more than what is reasonable.

The point is that time worked rarely equates with productivity. So while you may track the time your employees spend working, consider using it merely as an additional set of data that can help you diagnose the team's overall state of productivity.

THE REMOTE TEAM PROBLEM SOLVING CHECKLIST

When all members are not sharing an office or the same working hours, problem-solving can run into various snags. Without a set process, chaos and distraction will ensure. So in the following pages, you'll find a checklist to help your remote team navigate the process of problem-solving so they can focus on the actual work.

The actual problem-solving process in a remote team may not be different to that in any other environment. But when a team is distributed globally, constraints like time differences may pose additional challenges.

With a few tweaks, however, the basic problem-solving framework can be seamlessly adapted to fit remote work.

The American Society for Quality outlines problem-solving in four necessary steps: define the problem, generate alternative solutions, evaluate and select an alternative, and implement and follow-up on the answer.

The most significant change to that structure for remote teams is adding clear instructions about the hierarchies and protocols to follow when problems crop up.

PHASE 1: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Having a clear idea of what the problem is and how it affects the project, is the first step in solving any problem.

- **Nature of the Problem** – Knowing the nature of the problem (technical, process-oriented, decision-making) will help streamline whom to involve and what to do. For instance, whether to use a squeeze page or a sign-up form may involve the team lead and designer. But changing the coding language would need approvals from managers and clients.

- **Root Cause Vs. Symptomatic Vs. Repetitive Problem** – If urgent, a symptomatic problem should be solved immediately. Whereas, with sufficient time, it might be more efficient to find the cause and eliminate that. Repetitive issues almost always have a deeper cause.

- **Problem Alert System** – Classifying problems using something like an emergency alert system is useful when all team members aren't present in the same place. It'll let the team know whether it's an all-hands-on-deck situation or something less pressing.

PHASE 2: CLARIFYING HIERARCHIES AND PROTOCOLS

In a remote team, a manager/team lead might not be around all the time to deal with problems as they arise. Therefore, following protocol is indelible to maintaining order, keeping everyone informed, and knowing how to proceed.

- **Communication Platforms** – Remote communication tools (like Slack) are indispensable for virtual teams. But there should be one agreed-upon tool with which the entire team can be reached. Especially during emergencies.

- **Remote Management Tools** – Managing iterations, changes in requirements, task delegation, and time management – are all part of problem-solving. Using remote management tools, like Asana or Trello, will help keep track of the different variables.

- **Division of Labor** – In an agile environment, working with cross-functional teams, everyone needs a clear idea of what part of the problem they're solving. That along with lateral thinking and breaking up the problem will help solve it quicker.

- **Time Limit For Remote Teams** – Since a team distributed globally might not be reachable at once, response times from its members should be fixed. Without this, it will be challenging to keep everyone in the fold and utilize all resources to solve problems.

- **Code Red Situation** – Crises warrant a different set of protocols. Emergency contacts modes, shortened response times, knowing whom to ask for help (both on the project team and the client's point of contact) will help the remote team to solve the problem faster.

- **Unknown Problems** – Provisions should be made for when an unforeseen issue crops up. Adding a new feature to an app or changing a deadline, while unplanned, are regular software development phenomena. And the remote team should know how to proceed then.

- **Keeping Notes** – Keeping all the iterations, changes, and notes in one place (in the project management tool) will help everyone remain accountable and maintain order.

PHASE 3: GENERATING SOLUTIONS AND PICKING THE BEST ALTERNATIVE

Depending on the nature of the problem, the remote team should have a good idea about whether they'll be involved in the problem-solving process or not.

- **Brainstorming in Groups** – Ideally, solving a problem related to a project should involve everyone working on it. This would increase the chances of considering the problem from different points of views and getting at the best solution. For a remote team, this means pulling the group together on a video call on Skype or Zoom.

- **Authoritarian Decision** – When the problem isn't relevant, or there isn't enough time to involve everyone, the project managers and experts would come up with probable solutions.

- **Metrics of an Optimal Solution** – Based on metrics like how long it'll take to implement, how it'll affect other goals and sub-goals, how much resources it'll use, the best solution can be chosen.

PHASE 4: IMPLEMENTING THE OPTIMAL SOLUTION

Implementing the solution might involve redistributing tasks and roping in help from another team. Everyone on the team should be on the same page about their new roles.

- **Who is Involved** – Not everyone would be involved in implementing the solution. But they may be required for occasional technical consultation or work/time management help.
- **Timeframe** – Clear timeframes should be set for executing the solution, considering the overall project deadline and how it ties in with other project goals.
- **Re-Delegating Tasks** – While a part of the team is working on the solution, the rest of the team members might have to step in and manage other aspects of the project to meet deadlines.

BONUS STAGE: TEAM CULTURE

Although not directly a part of the problem-solving process, the right team culture can be the first line of defense in the face of any problem. Here are a few dos and don'ts that'll enable a remote team to work through a problem together:

- Foster an environment of free thinking
- Encourage intellectual diversity and experimentation
- Don't micromanage, but give some leeway
- Encourage collaboration
- Prepare new remote members on the requisite protocols

Having a problem-solving checklist can simplify some of the processes and control chaos while facing a problem. So the team can focus on the actual work.

INTERMISSION - A GROOVY CASE STUDY

Groove

Even today, fully-remote companies are a rare beast. They're doing things differently and yet growing faster than traditional businesses. Groove—a customer help-desk software—has experienced tremendous growth in the last five years as a globally distributed company. We're dissecting their values, work culture, hiring norms and more to see what might be beneficial for you. Read on.

We have a crush. We're smitten…

…With a rad company that defies all established business rules, helps SMBs serve their customers, and has a ton of fun along the way. We're talking about Groove.

Hey, if you thought it was you…why not just reach out and introduce yourself?

A help desk software, Groove was created especially for small businesses. Its ticketing system allows you to manage all customer interactions from one platform. When you can see how you previously interacted with a customer via email, socials, live chats, and calls at once you can serve them seamlessly and efficiently. It doesn't include hundred extra features you'd never use. But it's customizable and scalable, integrates with numerous apps like Slack and Zapier, and tracks important metrics like average response times and response quality.

Okay, all great stuff…but *why are we smitten?* I hear you ask. Well, one, they are fully remote – that naturally makes Groove our kind of people. Two, their small staff of 16 is spread across 16 cities in four different continents. And three, in about five years of existence they have helped 8000+ small businesses close 25 million+ customer support tickets. The cherry on top is that Capterra rates Groove a 4.5/5.

Color us impressed.

Let's see how they do it.

LESSONS IN REMOTE WORK FROM GROOVE

Why did Alex Turnbull decide to go fully remote when he founded Groove?

Groove isn't just a remote-first company. Nor did it become accidentally remote. Their value statement says *"we believe that amazing work doesn't require an office and that we can build a great company with everyone on our team living on their own terms."* More reason why we're crushing on Groove.

Alex has previously said that working from an office proved to be less effective for him and had decided that when the time came his own company would be fully-remote.

So what does Groove look for when hiring remotely? In an interview with Zapier, Alex said that he'll often ask prospective candidates what their work setup looks like. Consider answers like the couch or kitchen table red flags. Whereas an organised area dedicated to working from home is a win. As you'll see on later sections of this book, we've been evaluating remote workers based on that same question for a while now.

- Here are a few other things Groove looks for in successful remote candidates:
- Previous remote/entrepreneurial experience
- Freelancers for whom productivity isn't an "option"
- Mature decision-making skills
- Very communicative (max response time being 24 hours, a few hours is better)

7 LESSONS FROM GROOVE THAT'LL HELP YOUR BUSINESS ADAPT TO REMOTE WORK

Here are few notes from Groove about what's making them such a hit as a fully-remote company.

LESSON #1 – WHEN THE WORLD IS YOUR TALENT POOL, THE BEST CAN WORK FOR YOU.

And the size of the company is not a factor. Groove has a total of 16 employees. The team is spread across USA, Spain, Uruguay, Australia, Poland, Russia, Malta, and Germany. Because all ambitious, dedicated, hardworking people don't live in the same zip code.

Groove's employees include multiple entrepreneurs, such as Matt Beedle, who founded a $1M company in Berlin.

LESSON #2 – FLEXIBLE WORK HOURS MEAN MORE CONNECTED EMPLOYEES.

Whenever "their morning" is, a Groove employee posts on Slack about their day. They chat about work and social life, which has helped create a strong remote team culture.

LESSON #3 – MORE REMOTE, LESS POLITICS: EVERYONE SHARES AN EQUAL STAKE.

In the remote work environment, everyone knows what anyone is working on, how they are getting on, and what sort of help they might need.

At Groove, everyone is willing to share, help, and work together – without succumbing to office power play.

LESSON #4 – SIMPLE, SCRAPPY, AND FUN ARE GOOD REMOTE VALUES.

These values are part of Groove's core principles. When everyone's not working from a shared space, overly complicating things doesn't help. It forces you to remain focused and organised. There are no meaningless overheads to the company like rent and office equipment. When everyone works on their own terms, they get to have fun and enjoy the work they do.

LESSON #5 – REMOTE JOBS WARRANT KILLER BENEFIT PACKAGES.

Gone are the days of treating remote roles as second-class. Groove certainly knows that. Not only do they offer competitive salaries, but employees are also allowed to take as much paid time off as they want.

LESSON #6 – YOU GET A MUCH COOLER TEAM WHEN YOU HIRE REMOTELY.

Call it the result of a better work/life balance, but Groove employees surf, climb mountains, run, travel, and participate in endurance events. Maybe that's why they're also very keen to get to work on Mondays.

LESSON #7 – WHEN REMOTE A COMPANY VALUE, WORK HAPPENS EASILY

Groove employees are not evaluated on how much time they spend on a task. Simply their outputs. Basically, they get it done. The only thing that matters? What they accomplished.

TOOLS GROOVE USES TO WORK REMOTELY

A FEW TOOLS THAT HELP THE GLOBALLY DISTRIBUTED GROOVE FUNCTION BETTER:

Slack – team chat

Zoom – video calls and screen-sharing

Groove – customer support collaboration (duh!)

World Time Buddy – world clock

Trello – projects

Teamweek – high-level team task management

GoogleDocs – document storage

Tools can only take a great company so far. It's how users engage with them that makes the difference. In Groove's case, they've made communication a top priority.

They have daily stand-ups where everyone shares what they accomplished the day before and what they'll be handling that day. Weekly meetings at a fixed time, 'water-cooler chat' via Slack, and quarterly and yearly goals meetings also help the fully-remote team stay engaged.

WHEN WORK HITS THE FAN: MEASURES GROOVE TOOK TO AVOID BURNOUT

A couple of years after it's founding, Groove had a problem: it was growing too fast! The team couldn't keep up. 12-hour days had once punctuated final sprints toward important milestones. Now, they were the norm.

Alex knew this couldn't go on. His remote developers were slipping. Coding productivity as measured using Pivotal Tracker was down over 20%. Everyone was tired, slower, making more mistakes. Alex himself felt the burn. But work kept piling up.

Alex faced a common problem: remote employees are less likely to take time off. Groove let employees take as much time off as they wanted… But they wanted none!

People were fearful to go on vacation only to come back and find an huge pile of work waiting for them. And they felt guilty taking time off when the rest of the team was sweating bullets.

Alex saw that granting vacation time did nothing to help with stress and fatigue. Only actually using it can do that. Offering time off was not enough.

Let's take a look at the measures he took to solve Groove's remote team's burnout problem.

ADDING A REMOTE DEVELOPER TO THE TEAM

Of course, the most obvious solution to too much work is getting a new pair of hands. Right? Well, it's not so simple. Hiring is hard, and hiring a remote employee can be even harder.

You need people that are not only experts on their field, but also great communicators. The ability to self-motivate is also essential. And even for a successful startup, hiring a new remote developer has a budget impact.

Alex had been dreading doing it, and delaying it. But he knew it was the right call. So he bit the bullet. And soon after, he realised it had been a wise investment.

BE HONEST ABOUT WHAT IS A PRIORITY

As your company grows and is successful, it's tempting to see everything as urgent and important. Everything matters!

That's laziness in disguise, and a fear of making the tough decision of how to divide your manpower and focus. As Alex puts it in the company blog:

"The truth is, we weren't getting that many more mission-critical tasks. We were just flagging them as mission-critical because they were critical to keeping our productivity in line with the previous exhausting, overworked weeks."

Are you willing to sacrifice your team's performance to clear a checklist? Be honest with yourself. That's not a great trade-off. Find the big wins, the 20% of tasks that are urgent and important, the ones that make a big difference. The rest will be handled in due time.

SHOW IT'S OK TO TAKE TIME OFF

In the end, Alex had to recognise that he was part of the problem. He was as burnt out as everyone else – and he kept working. He told himself that he would be setting a bad example if he left while they were struggling.

It turns out he had to be forceful. On the week after Christmas, he took his time off. And he made sure everyone else did, too. He froze all non-critical tasks on their management software. This had the effect of closing Groove's virtual office for the entire week. Nobody was allowed to work.

As Alex wrote:

"Being a founder or CEO is no excuse to work yourself into the ground. On the contrary, if you want your team to be less stressed and more productive, lead by counter-intuitive example and take a vacation."

REAPING THE REWARDS

The results spoke for themselves. After that one week of not working, the Groove team's productivity shot up. Their remote developer team went from a 20% decrease in productivity to a 38% increase.

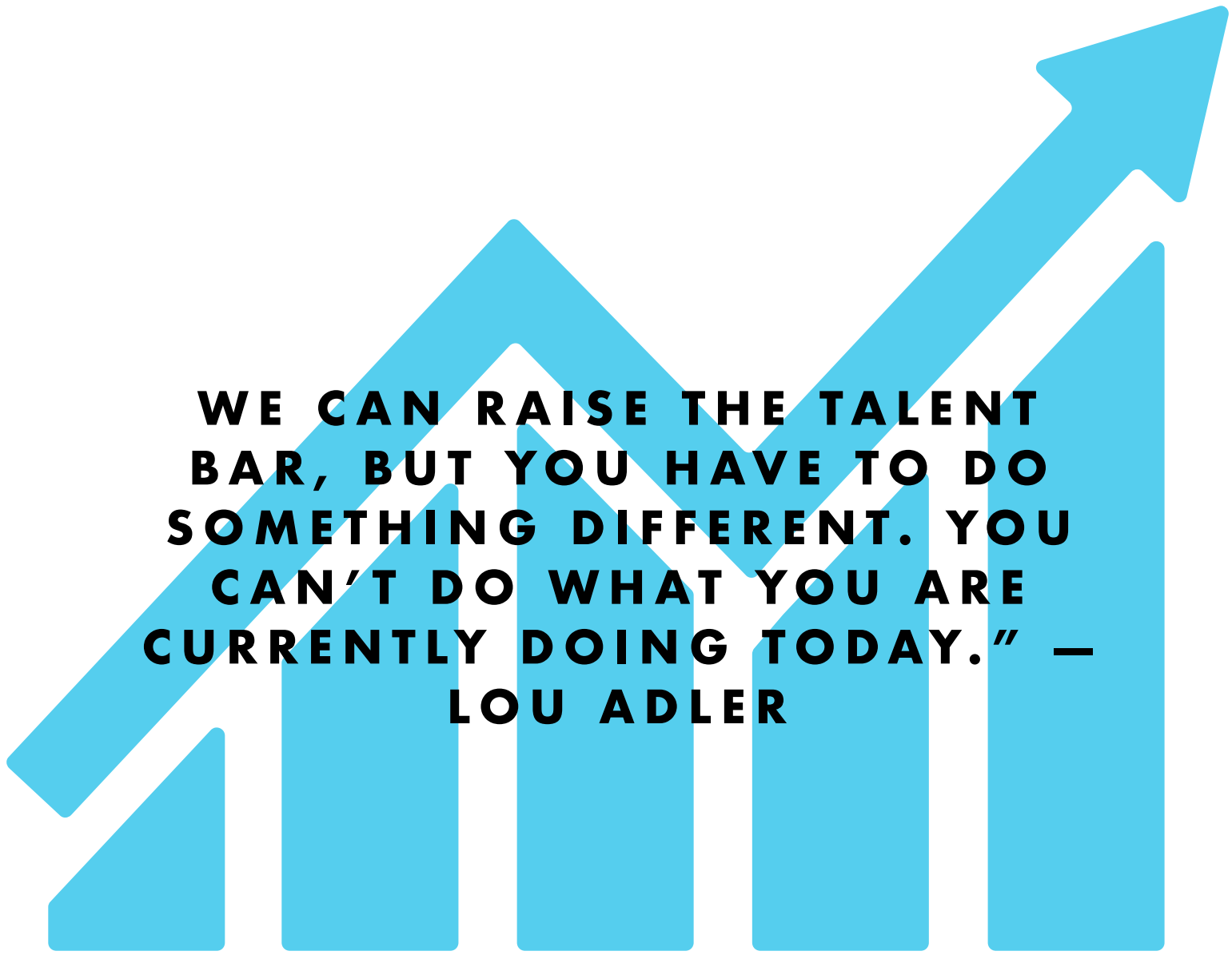
These results solidified Groove's commitment to look out for the health of their team. Even when the people in the team would rather sacrifice it for the good of the company. It's a cautionary tale about how we are often our own worst enemies. And shows how a little rest can go a long way towards maximising employee effectiveness.

The main lesson that Alex took from this episode?

Don't wait until burnout sets in. Have a plan in place to make sure your employees get all the rest they need.

III - SCALING UP: HOW TO ADD PEOPLE AND TEAMS

So, you've come to your senses and decided to hire a developer or two to work on your next project remotely. Congratulations! You've just made a decision that puts you on a pathway to software development nirvana. But what now? How will find the people you need? How are you going to decide if they are up to snuff? It's hard to get a feeling for their talent and values, remotely, right? And how exactly are you going to integrate them into your business? That's what this chapter is about.



WE CAN RAISE THE TALENT BAR, BUT YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT. YOU CAN'T DO WHAT YOU ARE CURRENTLY DOING TODAY." — LOU ADLER

THE REMOTE HIRING PROCESS, A TO Z

You're probably familiar with the hiring process in previous companies you've worked in, but hiring remote workers is a different ball game. The structure isn't much different, but there are different factos to take int account, and different questions that need to be answered.

So over this section, we'll offer some helpful tips and tricks to make the process as simple and stress-free as possible.

You might find yourself thinking:

- Where will I find capable remote workers?
- How do I know they're right for the job?
- What skills should I be looking for?
- How should I interview them?

So let's jump into each one of those questions.

WHERE TO FIND REMOTE WORKERS

It's rather hard to hire remote workers when you have no idea where to look for them. That's as good as wanting to make a sandwich but trying to do it without bread – don't be that guy.

If you're a small or startup company, it can be particularly difficult to get the word out there that you're hiring if you don't already have a strong audience from a blog, email list or your social media channels to reach out to.

If you want to find the best candidates, you have to ensure you use the best channels open to you.

Some of the platforms you can use:

- Social media – The internet is a great place to begin your search because remote workers tend to be big fans of the internet – after all, it's because of this that they're able to be remote workers in the first place. And where do most people hang out online? Yes, social media sites of course! Advertise your position on Facebook, Twitter, linkedIn, AngelList, and any other channels you have access to. The more places you spread the word, the higher your chances are of the right person stumbling across it.

- Your company career website – If you already have a website, it would be a great idea to dedicate a space on there for positions you're hiring for, and making it known that you're looking for remote workers.

- Your own professional network – Remote workers often start out as freelancers before they go remote, so reach out to your existing network and ask if anyone knows a suitable freelancer who might be right for your position. Think about anyone you've personally worked with throughout your career who might also be interested and the right fit, especially if you enjoyed working with them and found them easy to work with. Family and friends are also good people to ask to refer anyone they know who might be interested in taking on a new role.

- Job boards – There are a number of job sites that post remote positions and attract large numbers of applicants. Remote workers, especially in the early stages of their careers, tend to frequent job sites like these to find work, so save yourself time by going directly to the source.

- Remote hiring specialists – We're not ones to self-promote, but quite frankly, we couldn't not mention our services when they could be exactly what you're looking for. Here at Distant Job, we specialise in remote recruitment and deliver suitable candidates to you from the world's best talent. Most of the options above are passive - you wait for the candidates to find you. WE go around the world finding the exact person you need!

Make a list of every platform and resource you can think of to get the word out.

When you begin interviewing and eventually hiring, keep track of where the best candidates come from so you know for future reference where to go first.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN HIRING REMOTE WORKERS

- Availability – Think about the amount of contact you really need to have with this remote hire, and when or if they need to be available during a specific time block each day. Remote workers are often used to working their own hours and enjoy the freedom that brings. That being said, if you're looking for someone who must be available during regular office hours, be upfront about this when advertising the position.

- Specific needs – Figure out exactly what it is you want from your remote worker. What are your expectations day to day, and in long-term projects? What programs do they need to be familiar with, if any? Do they need to be able to work within a team, or will they be doing solo work? What are your rules when it comes to taking holidays?

- Freedom – Remote workers will have a slightly different set of qualities compared to employees in an office where everyone follows the status quo. Do you need someone who can problem solve on their own, and use their initiative? Do you need someone who can offer new ways of doing things, and be forthcoming in voicing in their opinion? Think about how much freedom you're willing to offer.

The clearer you are in your own head on what you want, the easier it will be to find that person.

COMPETENCIES TO MEASURE

When thinking about the kind of elements you need to include in your job listing, as well as the interview tasks or prep you ask your candidates to complete, it's important you're testing a set of competencies that are vital for success in a remote position, so you can separate the wheat from the chaff.

- Initiative – every remote worker needs a certain amount of initiative because they won't have a manager keeping an eye on them, making sure they're doing what they're supposed to be doing. You need to look for someone who doesn't need constant direction and babysitting.

- Commitment – being a remote worker means there's a chance you might slack off, or take an unnecessary number of long breaks because there's no one telling you what you

can or can't do. This is why you need to hire a candidate who is committed to the job, your company's goals and values, and in it for more than just the money.

- Time management – strong time management skills are necessary for remote workers because most of the time, they are one hundred percent in control of how they organize their day. They need to be good at estimating how long each task will take, and able to plan their day accordingly.

- Realistic job preview – make sure the candidate is aware of what to expect from your position and set clear expectations from the start. How often do they need to update you? Can they work whenever they want as long as they get the work done? A clear job preview will help to determine whether a candidate is suitable or not for the job.

- Able to prioritise – often, your remote worker will be given a list of tasks for the day or week, and left to use their judgment to determine what needs completing first and what can wait. You need someone who is able to focus and prioritise on the most important task each day.

- Proficient written communicator – As much as we recommend that you use video chat as much as possible, the majority of the time you'll be communicating with your people via email or team chats. This is why you need to ensure you hire someone who is a strongly written communicator and can effectively converse with all members of the team without speaking face to face.

- Trustworthy – make sure you can trust whoever you hire to get on with the job and complete it professionally and to the standards you require. You don't want to lose any sleep worrying what they're doing half way around the world where you're not able to see them.

IF YOU LOOK, THEY WILL COME

There isn't a shortage of remote workers. In fact, there are way more people trying to be remote workers than there are jobs available, many of whom won't have the right skills for your position.

That being said, there are great remote workers out there who do have the exact skills and qualities you are looking for. Your challenge is to figure out how to reach them and keep them.

TO HIRE OR NOT TO HIRE… WHAT WAS THE INTERVIEW QUESTION?

It's a good idea to use multiple interview methods, including email, phone or skype interviews; because it's hard to tell what someone's really like when you can't see their body language, tone or expressions. Video will help you gauge their personality to see if they're a good fit for your company.

Conversing via email will also help you assess how strong they are in written communication, and how quickly they respond.

Ask them how they schedule their day, what being a remote worker means to them, and how they prioritise tasks. Use everything you've learned in previous section to make sure you're assessing their competencies.

What follows is a non-non-exhaustive list of our favorite questions.

TECHNICAL

"How are you equipped to handle remote work?"

In this instance, you want to make sure your candidate has the proper equipment to handle remote work. I.e., A computer, reliable Internet connection, suitable programs, adequate storage for sensitive information, (for example, remote workers who deal with patient paperwork must have a way to keep them private per HIPAA standards), a place to work…

"Are you comfortable using time tracking software?"

Many companies prefer workers to track their time using tracking software. It's good to make sure the candidate is familiar or at least willing to learn how to use it. Personally, we don't think this is that efficient - we're rather measure goals and KPIs. But if you want to use it, check that your candidate is OK with it.

"How do you plan on staying organised?"

You don't want to hire someone that's going to be all over the place with their tasks even if it does seem like there's a method to the madness. Check for competence in apps such as Google Calendar, Trello or To-Do tasks lists to name a few. Whether it's knowing what time they need to open the Bifrost or meeting a client's deadline, you want your remote worker prepared.

PERSONAL

"What remote experience do you have?"

While this could be an obvious question, it's crucial to gauge the skill level of your potential hire. Those who have worked outside of a traditional office beforehand have a better understanding of what to expect and what you as an employer expect. It's a good way to tailor the rest of the meeting, when you understand their background and skill level.

"How do you deal with distractions?"

Remote employees have the luxury of working from home, but it's important to make sure they have a game plan with how to deal with distractions that come with being at home (or the local cafe, library or beach…)

"How do you process information?"

As the manager, you need to be aware of how your employee prefers to learn. Whether it's visual or audio, big picture (the whole task explained all at once) or given in smaller tasks.

"Why do you want to work remotely?"

It's always good to find out the motivation for wanting to be a remote worker. Whether it's a desire to travel, a preference to stay at home or an inclination to work alone. It will help you get to know the candidate better and if their answer is something along the lines of they do their best work on their schedule and own terms they could be an excellent selection.

"How do you keep yourself motivated?"

Without the camaraderie of being around coworkers and in an actual office environment, the possibility of remote workers losing their motivation is a common issue, so make sure your candidate has a game plan for such situations.

"Tell me about a project you completed on your own."

Whether it's an example from their personal life, work or school, it will give you a feel for how they function on their own. Note that an ideal candidate will not struggle to come up with an example.

EXPECTATIONS

"How do you troubleshoot problems by yourself?"

A lot of times, teams made up of remote workers don't always work at the same time, and if your remote worker comes across a problem, it's important to know how they would react without any assistance from anyone else. Have an idea of how you want them to respond and what you expect.

"Tell me about a time when a colleague was unhappy with your work, and what ensued."

In addition to knowing how the candidate would react, it's crucial to understand how you would resolve the conflict once management gets involved. Similarly, negative feedback will inevitably be given, and this question will help find out how the candidate will react to it.

"Do you prefer to work within a structured environment or would you rather have things less regimented?"

It's important to find out whether or not the candidate will need to be micromanaged or not and how frequently you will need to be in contact with him.

"What would you describe miscommunication as?"

Good communication is the only way remote working is successful so arguably this could be your most important question. Establishing and maintaining communication is the key to a good worker. For both remote and in-house employees. Zapier's CEO Wade Foster notes that *"effective communication is so key in a remote position that these little things are a sign of a person who might be a great fit."*

WELCOME HOME (REMOTELY)

So what to do now that you have a remote team (or individual) who needs to mesh with the structure of your company? That's what we'll explore in this section. Keep in mind that we'll be referring to integrating an entire remote team, but every tip is easily adaptable to a single individual.

One of two scenarios applies here. The first is that your company already has some staff working from home, either full or part-time. In that case, you'll need to think about how this new, virtual team, is going to work within your existing structures.

Alternatively, this might be the first time you've trusted a project to staff who are physically working elsewhere. If that's the case, then you'll want to try and avoid some of the pitfalls. Luckily for you, we can help with that.

We've helped lots of companies integrate the best global talent into their development staff over the years, and as we've done that we've learned a thing or two. Here are a few things you might want to keep in mind, as you bring your new team or individual into the fold.

CLARITY

Where does this team fit into the overall structure of the company? The key word there is 'into.' Make sure that your digital nomads feel and are seen as every bit as much part of the company as their colleagues who work at HQ.

Think about things like:

- Updating organisational charts to show the new team and where it fits.
- Making sure that new staff gets introduced to the rest of the company by mentioning them in meetings (or letting them attend via video call) or in staff newsletters.
- Get them a company email address, and include their contact details in the staff directory.
- Clarifying for your team where they sit in the company, and who they can call on for help or support. You don't want to become their sole point of contact!

SET EXPECTATIONS

Your company should have a remote working policy, which offers guidelines for your new team as to what is expected of them.

It's also important that other staff know what to expect from remote workers. There may be some residual prejudices to staff from overseas left over from the horror days of outsourcing. Your job is to do some education for your company to ensure that everyone knows you've hired excellent, professional, talent.

ONBOARDING

Virtual teams need a different onboarding process, but we'd advise being flexible about introducing new employees; some people just need more support than others. It can be helpful to work from the inside out, to start with introductions and video calls with the staff your team will interact with most often and then expand to the rest of the company.

Don't neglect the practical side either. Make sure that your digital nomads have all the equipment and information they need to get to work. Having a checklist of apps that require installing, or websites that need to be registered with will get the logistics sorted before they start.

Ultimately, remote teams work much better when they're self-sufficient. The team manager's job is to make sure that distributed workers have what they need, so they can just get on with their jobs.

BUILD A TEAM IDENTITY – AND SHARE IT!

Feeling a part of a something is even more critical for distributed teams than it is for those in the office. We've talked in more detail about building a sense of team. Letting your team decide what values underpin their roles can be a defining moment in bringing them together.

Once they've set that goal, don't forget to communicate it to colleagues. It may feel like a PR job, but you do need to represent your team in a different way when they don't work onsite. While workers in the same office will know each other in passing, the chances are the only colleagues who will interact with your virtual team will be those who work with them.

ENSURE SMOOTH COMMUNICATION

It's often said that connection is the oxygen of remote teams. They die without it. We've talked at length before about getting this right. The TL;DR version is:

- Have multiple channels of communication, and make sure everyone is clear which to use for what.
- Stay in touch with everyone. It's hard to over-communicate with remote staff, and daily stand-ups are ideal for keeping everyone on the same page.
- Just make sure it's communication with a purpose; don't stray onto the dark path of micro-managing.

Include time to 'shoot the breeze'. Make socialising a part of meetings, and have a 'virtual water cooler' of some sort.

PREPARATION

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, as the old saying goes. If you invest some time in preparing for your remote team to start work, it will pay dividends in the longer term when everything runs smoothly.

For us, that means hiring the right people in the first place. Remote working isn't for everyone, and some staff finds the responsibility of setting their own pace, or the relative isolation, to be hard to manage.

If you want to make sure that your team is made up of the best global talent, that is proven to work well at a distance, then get in touch. It's what we do, and we'd love to do it for you.

HIRE BETTER. HIRE REMOTE. HIRE NOW.