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No place like Home: Managing remote programmers, remotely

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ABSTRACT

More people are working remotely either on a regular or full-time basis and there are pros and cons for the company, manager and worker. Based on 5 years' experience of managing remote programmers, while working remotely, this paper gives guidance on issues to be considered and traps to be avoided if you are managing people who work remotely. Technical challenges of IT and communication will be covered, but the main focus is on the management challenges. We will cover the type of candidates who are most suitable to working remotely and suggestions for the interview and onboarding process. Particular strategies are needed to get to know your remote worker well to start to build a good rapport. Close oversight of their work and projects is required so that you can learn to trust in their abilities and motivation. Methods for effective performance management are discussed and some lessons learned provided.

INTRODUCTION

Fewer distractions and interruptions from colleagues, reduced stress from commuting and minimal office politics can make remote working a more productive option for many workers. Also some people crave the work-life balance that working from home can give you and some workers will put this above salary considerations in deciding on their future position. However, working from home can be a lonely experience, especially for people who are 100% remote. Managers need to understand the challenges facing remote workers and be able to fully engage with their team and be able to effectively monitor, mentor and trust them. This paper highlights some of the technical and management challenges of managing remote workers. The examples and experience is related to managing remote programmers, but many of the concepts are applicable to many different job roles.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

The advances in technology over the years means that it is now much easier to ensure that the right technology is in place to enable people to be effective working remotely. Broadband speed has improved and the ability to talk to people and see them while talking, means communication is easier than ever. The following include some basic technical set up requirements:

- Laptops to be set up correctly so that all systems work and access is enabled on day 1.
- Helpdesk need to be able to remote log on to machines to resolve any issues.
- Other contact methods are established in case of access issues, e.g. phone and personal email.
- Speed of connections needs to be good enough to ensure workers can access all systems and documents as easily as they could in the office.

The office set up at the remote location needs to be agreed in advance and must meet minimum technical requirements. It is ideal if the remote worker has a separate office space that is away from the rest of the house and won't get disturbed by any person or animal in the house. The room should have ample space for a desk, laptop, screen, printer / scanner and have good lighting and temperature control. Although many laptops have an embedded camera, a separate webcam, along with a headset or speakers may be useful to ensure visual communication works well. HR policies should cover if there is going to be a separate phone line or broadband connection for work and what the company will pay for. Cytel requires photos of the remote office set up to ensure it is appropriate and there is a guideline on budgets for equipment and any ongoing costs.

Different forms of communication are needed to be able to manage remote workers:

- Email
- Instant messaging (IM)
- Instant voice calls with the ability to be able to see each other and share desktops
- Mobile phone connection, maybe via WhatsApp or similar software, to connect across different countries.



Need to agree with team the scenarios when each method is used. Email is generally used for detailed information or if a response is not needed immediately. IM is used for questions where a response is needed quickly and the response is short. If a more detailed response is needed quickly, then sending an IM to check if someone is available for a call is always a good idea. A mobile phone is needed to report sickness or any out of hours' communication.

MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

The percentage of time people work remotely is usually from 20% to 100%. For workers who are only 20% remote, the technical challenges still apply, but the management challenges are less applicable. The greater the percentage remote, the more emphasis should be placed on the management challenges and the more important to correctly identify the right characteristics in people who are most suited to working remotely.

The following are good traits / characteristics for workers who are 100% remote:

- Senior level programmer who understands the industry and role well.
- Good knowledge of programming language and self-sufficient to search for help if needed.
- Programmer with good communication skills who is confident to talk to people on the phone and be proactive in reaching out to people to ask questions or offer advice.
- People who have already worked remotely on a regular basis, e.g. 1-2 days per week.
- People who live in fairly remote locations as they have the greatest desire to make the remote working successful and they will be dedicated.
- People with childcare fully covered for the period of time at work.

Some people like the idea of working remotely, but there may be different expectations on exactly what this means and this should be discussed fully during the recruitment process. As so much of the communication is not in person, then the worker needs to be an effective communicator on the phone and this can be assessed during interviews. The use of video for interviews is mandatory and care should be taken to have as much eye contact as possible during the interview. Getting the candidate to talk as much as possible about themselves, their home life, the advantages and disadvantages of remote working and any likely obstacles enables you to see how well this is likely to work. There needs to be an easy rapport quite quickly as it will be more difficult to get to know them if they are fully remote. Giving examples of how remote working is currently working in the company, for example, the hours worked and what flexibility is given for appointments, trips to the gym etc., will enable people to see if they can fit in with the expectations. It is also important to discuss how much travel will be necessary, either to the local office, client site or to meet with colleagues in different locations.

After a successful video interview, would usually progress to face to face interview for all permanent workers. This helps to see how adaptable people are for travel and their desire for the role. A presentation from the candidate is often a good way to assess their communication skills and knowledge in a chosen area. Interviews from multiple people may be beneficial depending on level, for example, senior management, HR or colleagues. It is important to spend some time together to gauge how well you think they will fit in to the team.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR TEAM

The start of the employment can be key to how successful remote working will be. It is ideal for the remote worker to have some time in the local office in the first week so that they can:

- Speak with HR and understand the policies and guidelines applicable to them.
- Meet with the senior managers who are available.
- Meet with colleagues from across the company.
- Get a feel for the company culture.

When they are not in the local office, you need to speak regularly and use video whenever possible, even if the call is just for a few minutes. Make sure you make time for the small talk and find out how they are and how their weekend was, exactly as you would do if you met in person. Be personal, find out details about partners, family, hobbies and interests. Provide the same information about yourself to increase the connection. This requires greater effort from the manager as you won't have time in lunch breaks to get to know each other.

In the first couple of weeks, it is recommended to speak daily to ensure you are there to answer questions and ensure the on-boarding and training is progressing well. Have pre-defined meetings, e.g. beginning or end of the day but also have ad-hoc calls and send frequent messages so that they know you are available for them. Would



suggest to speak at least twice per week in weeks 2 - 4 and then at least weekly after that, but it depends on their level and how closely you are working together on projects.

There is likely to still be a requirement for the remote worker to be available at a local office or client site for project related meetings. Project kick off meetings may be face to face and also other project related meetings, like audits or inspections may require the worker to be present in person. There is also a need for the manager and worker to actually meet up face to face on a 'regular' basis, how regular will depend on the location of the worker and manager and the worker's experience level. If travel is fairly easy, this could be once per week, but is often once per month or once per quarter for people who are more remote. Would suggest to ensure meetings can be productive on both sides, but also include time for social activities. In Cytel, there is a UK team lunch that happens approximately once per quarter where all UK based employees get together for lunch and a catch up. This is usually an event where people travel just for the day, but the socialising may go on into the evening if people are available. This is a valuable opportunity for the remote team to feel part of the company and to find out more what is going on in different departments. It is beneficial if HR can be represented on a regular basis and for department heads to attend on occasion. In addition, there is a UK programmers meeting that happens on an annual basis where all the UK programmers get together for an overnight stay and a day working together on topics relevant to the team. The overnight stay is important to further enhance the team building.

HOURS OF WORK

Many people expect a better work life balance by working remotely and some may want greater flexibility in the hours that they work to fit around other commitments. This should be discussed fully during the recruitment process, some employers might be okay with people having an unusual working pattern, but many will want their remote team to be available when other team members are online. With global working across multiple time zones being very common it is possible to adapt to different requests, e.g. starting and finishing early, but the manager needs to know when the worker is available and working. If you want people to work extra hours at times of tight deadlines, then it is good to give some flexibility for any personal appointments when it is possible.

You need to agree at the start of the employment the approximate hours that people are likely to be working and obtain details of any specific personal requests, e.g. finish early on a particular day. What is needed for the project should be the priority and if flexibility can be given that ensures a more engaged team, then this should be considered. Ensure your team know what your availability is and let them know if there is any reason you will deviate from this. You need to be available for your team as there may be fewer people they can easily go to with queries. This is especially true at periods of high workload, as a manager you cannot cut yourself off from your team to get on with your own work as that might be causing them frustrations and could be making them less efficient.

HOW CAN YOU TRUST PEOPLE ARE WORKING?

You need to build trust in your team and they need to learn to trust you as their manager as this will help to build rapport. It is useful to have IM software like skype that shows you when people log on and off and if you have agreed hours of work then it is easier to confirm they are working the expected hours. However, to be able to build up trust in the workers' effectiveness and efficiency, it is necessary to work closely with them on projects. If possible, assign them to projects that you are involved in and provide an expectation of how much output they should be producing each week. This needs to be monitored on a regular basis and checked against weekly timesheet information to ensure it is accurate. As they are learning the processes and standard tools such as company macros, they are likely to be less efficient, but you should see this improve over the first couple of months. You need to be actively involved in the project to be able to make this assessment so that you appreciate the programming and study complexity. This approach should also be used if someone is office based as just because someone is in the office, doesn't mean they are being effective.

Remote workers could get distracted by activities going on at home, but this is less likely with a dedicated office space and agreed working hours as people then still 'go to work'. Use a mix of the different methods of communication to check on the responsiveness. Have regular scheduled calls and always use video, to see the worker, but also to see what is happening around them. Are they still in their dedicated office, are there people coming and going, how quiet is it? It is important to have ad-hoc calls at different times of the day to ensure the picture is the same during the work day. If applicable, are they still fully available once any children return from school? Is the picture the same during school holidays? Be a little unpredictable at the beginning of working with them and if the picture is always the same and they are producing output as expected, then you will begin to trust in their work ethic. Spending some time on this early in the employment will enable you to get to know your worker, but will also enable you to build trust that they are working as expected and to the efficiency you want.



HR AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

If having remote workers is fairly new to your company, you may need to work with HR to ensure all policies and procedures are suitable for remote working. The process for electronic signatures is now common place and so problems of wet ink signatures should be reduced. If packages do need to be sent to or from the remote worker, you need agreement on how this will be done and paid for. You don't want your remote worker to be wasting time queuing at the post office or submitting expense claims for small items.

Many companies are likely to have an annual performance management process, along with some regular catch up calls to ensure progress is being made against any goals set. It is preferable if any annual performance management meeting can be conducted in person to ensure any concerns are resolved face to face. If this isn't possible, then this needs to be via video as seeing the facial expressions is really important for topics related to performance. There should be no surprises at the annual meeting and if there have been performance issues during the year, they need to be discussed as quickly as possible, even if this cannot be face to face.

If an issue arises, either from the worker or from the manager then have a video call to discuss as soon as possible after notification of the issue. If it is related to performance, this can rarely be resolved via email and this method of communication should be discouraged for any topics that are subjective. Ideally, have a call in the worker's native language as trying to discuss performance across languages can cause misunderstandings. If a new performance issue has been discussed with the worker, always follow-up fairly soon with another call as concerns can magnify when you are remote. The usual rules of giving feedback to ensure it is timely, specific, and actionable still apply for remote workers, but the follow-up of any issues and implementation of any lessons learned are just as important.

POSITIVE IMPACT ON COMPANY

When you first start managing remote workers extra effort is needed to get the process to work effectively. Updates may be needed for existing systems or processes and it may take some time to convince everyone that it is beneficial. Remote working won't suit everyone and the worker's particular situation must always be taken into account before they start working remotely. The manager must make additional effort with remote workers to ensure they are fully engaged and aligned with the rest of the team. However, the extra effort is likely to reap many rewards.

Most projects are managed over multiple locations and time zones and so ensuring all processes work remotely will make project work more efficient. Also, project issues arise frequently and having people skilled in managing and communicating remotely could help resolve project related issues. Remote workers can be more efficient as they don't get distracted by what else is going on in the office. If they need quiet time to work on complex tasks they can do this more easily than office based workers. If workers have the right work life balance, they are more engaged and loyal to the company. In addition, at periods of high workload, it may be easier for remote workers to work extra hours with it having less impact on their home life, e.g. have dinner with the family and then return to work later. At Cytel, having a large number of remote workers has enabled Cytel to expand more rapidly and to more locations than would have been possible without remote workers. It is advantageous being able to recruit skilled people based on their experience and suitability to the role rather than their proximity to an office.

LESSONS LEARNED

Being flexible with the management structure may be necessary in case changes are needed. Initially the structure for remote workers at Cytel in Project Bases Services was that a local group leader managed all local programmers within that geographic region. This was advantageous as the group leader was familiar with the regulations and expectations of the local area and face to face meetings were more likely, e.g. UK team lunch. However, this meant the group leader was managing some workers who were not working directly on the projects they were overseeing. Additional time was then needed to discuss the projects with the worker and also with the group leader they were working with. Approval of annual leave or actions upon notification of sickness was not straight forward as the group leader was not aware of all the project timelines and requirements. Also, this made any performance management issues harder to resolve and multiple group leaders were involved.

The organization was restructured so that now the group leader only manages people who are working on the projects they are overseeing. This has made the management of the workers and projects simpler and enables efficiency to be monitored on a regular basis. The team can still engage with the local group leader if there are specific issues related to their geographical location and they still meet regularly at any local face to face meetings. It is then important that the group leader still meets with their remote workers in person on occasion, even if this means some travel for both parties.



CONCLUSION

Effective communication across the team, whether remote or globally distributed, is essential to ensure information is shared in a timely manner. There are often improvements that can be made to ensure remote workers have the same information as people who are office based. Clear expectations of working habits from both the manager and worker are needed from the beginning and adaptation to practices may be needed over time. More management time may be needed to build trust, engagement and rapport in the remote team. People do still need to be face to face with their team and this needs to be seen as important, be planned in advance and committed to by the manager, team and company. The workers can then enjoy their remote role, improved work life balance, while being effective and efficient team members.

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