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Remotely Manage your Teams Time and Tasks Efficiently

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ABSTRACT

Virtual work environment offers great flexibility and benefits to both the employers and employees in many aspects and is widespread among SAS® programmers working in the pharmaceutical and CRO industry. Though there are numerous benefits associated in working remotely, there are many challenges in building the team, communicating, prioritizing tasks, managing the team members' and managers' time. This paper will describe effective methods in hiring, managing the global teams; as well as ways to overcome challenges faced in delivering the tasks on time and with great quality from a programmer, project manager and the lead programmer's angle. Also, this paper will describe in detail various methods to effectively manage the team and get the maximum out of programmer's time without the need of micro monitoring - which benefits the employers and employees.

INTRODUCTION

A remote team is a group of professionals from various time zones, cultures and skills who work together on a unified project. A lot of energy has been expended over the last few years debating the merits of remote work and how to make the process of remote work efficient. The beauty of remote work is its flexibility which allows employees to work from where they are by eliminating the need to travel, but, at the same time, it takes a different level of effort to monitor and maintain the relationship within the team members. However, the idea of working remotely can be made efficient by employing certain techniques during the hiring process, work allocation to team members, team meetings and close communication.

SECTION 1: WHOM TO HIRE AND HOW?

Considering the timelines, assessing the number of resources needed and their skill set is vital in building the team. It is the responsibility of the hiring manager to draft the requirements/expectations for the role before initiating the hiring process. Hiring wrong candidate will be expensive for the companies, as they have to invest time and money in the hiring and training processes and might risk missing the project timelines.

SECTION 1.1: RESUME SELECTION

Short listing of the resume is a tedious process, as it is impossible for the manager to read every line of resume. In this stage the manager should seek the help of recruiter and gain a short summary of the candidate skills and weakness in desired areas as a cover letter. By reviewing the candidates previous work environment, the manager can assess if he fits into the required role, as the work settings in CRO's will be different from Pharmaceutical companies, onsite working model to remote work model. Summary of the resume can be used as a background to assess if the candidate has any prior experience of the current assignments and also to assess if the candidate can be of any help on different assignments when needed.

SECTION 1.2: HIRING PROCESS

Hiring the right candidate is a demanding process, as the hiring manager should assess if the candidate has the desired skills and experience as the resume may not speak completely. Also, the manager should evaluate if the candidate can fit into the team and evaluate if he can work at the same pace with existing team. Interviewing over telephone or a video call may not be recommended at all times while an in-person interview is recommended to select the right candidate. When a video conferencing is only available choice for interview it is suggested to explore different applications like whatsapp®, facetime® etc., as this will reduce the lag between audio and video. Also, it is advisable to arrange a chat with the study team members where the candidate will be supporting so that the team can assess the skills and behavior.



SECTION 1.3: TIME ZONES

It is left to the discretion of the company and hiring manager in selecting geographical work location of candidate when the teams are spread across countries. Multiple factors come into play in choosing the geographical location of the candidate and are not limited to budget, working hours of other team members, legal issues, finding right resources etc. It is advisable to have an off shore team who work at distinct timings like United States and India when there is a shared tool used for programming which do not allow multiple users to run the job at the same time. This type of arrangement will reduce the load on server and ensures continuous work round the clock and is preferred when the project timelines are short.

SECTION 2: REMOTE TEAM MANAGEMENT

Managing remote team is a challenging task as the team member's work at different time zones and with different working styles. It is advisable to set clear expectations to team members on work hours, availability, key projects and deadlines, scheduled weekly meetings and communication process.

SECTION 2.1: MEETINGS

Meetings are the preferred mode of knowledge sharing and it is highly encouraged that the agenda for every meeting to be shared in advance with the members which will have the team informed on topics that are intended for discussion. The host of the meeting should be prepared to deliver what was planned and leave the team ample time for questions. If we do not schedule time to meet or talk with one another and hopefully face to face, silence becomes very loud and dangerous, as remote employees might end up wondering how they're doing¹. Video conferencing is an effective means of real-time communication which enables people across distance to collaborate in a more productive and convenient way. In a study by Bond-Barand on the influence of video conferencing and its relationship to project communication with a population size of 270, 88% of population found video conferencing to increase the quality of communication when the team is geographically dispersed.² Most of the studies recommend a face to face meeting at least once in a calendar year.

Weekly Team Meeting

A weekly team meeting is important to let the team discuss on upcoming deliverables, timelines and where the team stands on meeting the deadlines. It works as a platform to discuss on the general study specific rules and address team questions so that team stays on same page. It is suggested that only the team members relevant to the project are included in the meetings, so we do not waste other team member's time. Also, it is advised that any topic that interests few members which needs elaborate discussion be taken offline to accommodate other team member's time. These meetings aid in planning the strategies to achieve target and set clear expectations from the team. It is suggested that these meetings be scheduled over video conference, so that all the team members pay attention to topic as the team members do know that the entire team is observing them. The frequency of the meetings can be increased as and when we near a deliverable to ensure that there are no risk for quality and timelines.

One to One Meeting

Scheduling a periodic one-one meeting by the managers with all the direct reports is recommended to ensure that an employee is not left behind and learn about their workload and any future vacation plans of the member. This will give the opportunity to the employee to discuss in detail any issues that they are not comfortable speaking in front of all team members. Not all the team members work at the same pace and some programmers may work intentionally at a very slow pace, scheduling a frequent one-one with such members will help to learn about their bottle neck issues and will indirectly prompt them to increase their speed and commitment towards the project.

SECTION 2.2: COMMUNICATION

When the team functions remotely, communication plays a key role in completing a project as it is a team work. Though there are many modes of communication, typically email, instant chat messengers and phones are widely used. No question is big or small and sometimes a question that is assumed to be very small may lead to a major finding. The team members should be educated that over communication is always better than under communication and create an environment where team members speak up without any hesitation on all questions.

Email

Email is the traditional method of communication and helps to document all the decisions made. Emails also help in knowledge transfer process from one team member to another. Team should be encouraged to copy the lead on all the team communications. This approach not only helps in understanding the live progress of study, but also will help to understand that the team is working in right direction. Another added advantage is that when a team member leaves the company, it leaves no evidence of the rationale to frame a rule that is specific to a case. Though over communication is



recommended, the team members should use their judgment to include only the team members relevant to the information present in email and try to avoid spamming others inbox. The team should be encouraged to include their signature with their title and contact details on every communication.

Instant Messenger

Instant messengers play a key role in remote work to quickly chat and share screen with colleagues. It acts as a tool for informal communication and is efficient when a quick answer is needed. All the messengers do have an option that shows the status of the member as either available, busy, away, in-meeting etc. and often work in conjunction with the outlook calendar. The team should be encouraged that they always set the status icon appropriately to reflect their current status. The manager and team members can tag each other so that a notification pops-up whenever there is a change in the status of tagged person. This helps to track the team members who are opting for breaks and aids in monitoring the team members in and out frequency.

Phone

Verbal communication helps to draw a conclusion quickly over email communication as there will be a turnaround time involved in every cycle of email communication. As the team members are not present at a common place, every member should be made available over phone when needed during their work hours as some issues may be time sensitive and requires an answer right away.

SECTION 2.3: WORK ALLOCATION AND STATUS TRACKING

Ensuring that all the team members have enough work to keep them busy and keeping a track of it is a challenging task. The manager can use various tools available in the market to analyze the metrics of every candidate and ensure proper utilization of every team member's time. When there are global teams working on the same project, communicating with cross continent teams at the same time is a daunting task. This issue can be negated by allocating the production and validation tasks to the same team which reduces the turnaround time on the validation findings.

Shared Work Load

It is the responsibility of the manager and the team lead to monitor the work load of each team member and ensure that all the members will have an equal work load. The work can be allocated based on each member's strengths and skills-set. Distributing the load equally among the team promotes a healthy work environment and aids in work life balance of every employee. When a team member is overwhelmed with the work, it should be the responsibility of the manager or lead to identify and distribute the work to other team members. It is also advisable that the lead do not work 100% of their time on programming but to delegate part of their time on oversight tasks.

Tracking the work progress

Tracking the progress of team is vital to ensure quality and on-time delivery. Apart from the regular planned meetings it is advisable to have frequent meetings when we are nearing the deadlines and the team should be advised to drop an email with the summary of what was accomplished for the day and what are pending on their end with potential reasons. This will help to mitigate the potential risks and help in guiding the team to ramp up the work pace. Tracking the accomplishments of each team member on a daily basis during normal working days may be time consuming and a tedious task. This can be achieved by employing some simple techniques using tools like JIRA, RALLY, tracking sheets and most importantly with the timesheets. Every tool has its own advantages and disadvantages in tracking the work on an individual level. This can be overcome by advising the team that the timesheet entry should contain the hours spent in detail on a task basis at a granular level. A simple example of time entry is shown in the below table. Additional rows for the same day can be added for additional tasks.

Table 1. Sample timesheet

Day	Date	Study	Task	Detail Work Notes	Time
Thursday	27-Dec-18	Study 101	SDTM Production	VS -1hour, Ae -2hours, MH -2hours, EX -3hours,	8
Friday	28-Dec-18	Study 101	SDTM Validation	CO -3hours, DM -4hours, FA -1hour Plan for next week: Delivery for study 101 is on Wednesday 02Jan2019 and addressing study 102 comments are in pipeline which may need 2 days	8

Capturing the time spent on a category and on item basis will help in designing the metrics and also help in evaluating the reasons for the overtime on any tasks. The team should be encouraged to add in additional details when they run over the planned amount of time on any task. We can also see that in the above table, on every Friday (typically last work day of the week) the planned work for the next week is furnished by the candidate. This helps the manager to assess work load of the candidate and helps the manager to plan on the future tasks. The method of requesting the detail work notes during timesheet submission indirectly prompts the team members to request for additional tasks when they have nothing to work on a given day.

SECTION 2.4: DEDICATED PROJECT MANAGER

Having a dedicated project manager will take the administrative burden off of the lead programmer. Project managers do help in providing the required permissions, study access and necessary tools to the team members and ensure the team is equipped to reach the target on time. Also, they keep a tab on the study timelines and follow-up regularly on the progress. They also help in negotiating the timelines with the client, budget constraints, track the number of hours spent by team on the study and in project planning and related tasks. They also help to find the answers from the cross functional teams like data management and clinicians.

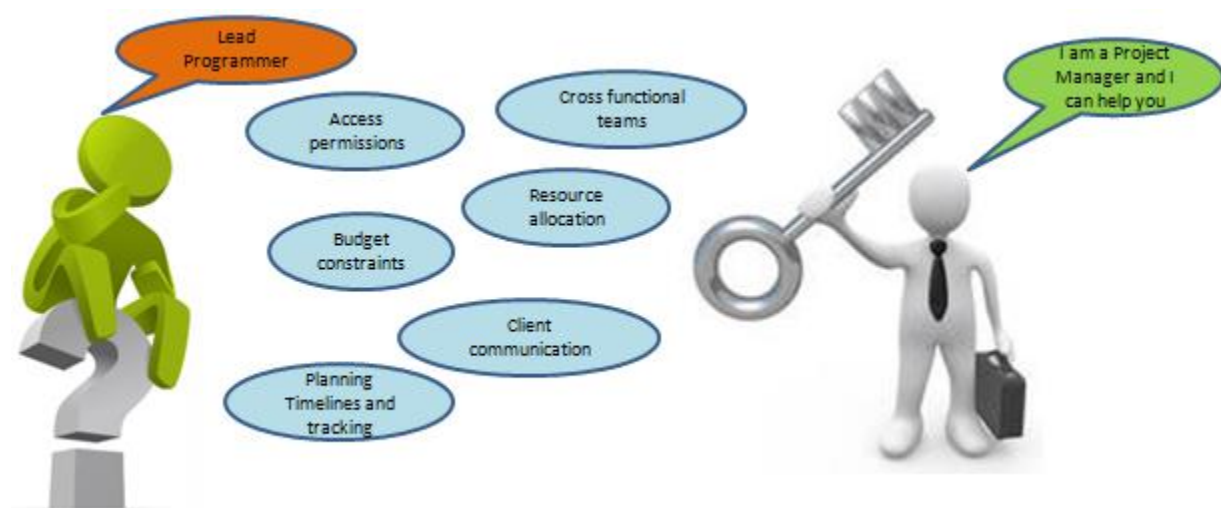


Figure 1. Tasks the project manager can share the burden off of lead programmer.

SECTION 3: LIMIT THE USE OF SYSTEM TO AUTHORIZED PERSON ONLY

In a conventional office setting, identity of the persons entering into premises either to work or visit can be verified. Similar verification is not feasible in the case of remote work setting, but some preventive measures can ensure that only authorized person is accessing the system. These measures include but are not limited to the following:

- The traditional method of logging into system using a password can be replaced to use the finger print reader/facial recognition software. A onetime verification of the employee identity at the time of issuing the system would suffice.
- The employees should be advised that they display their picture on their profile which can be easily validated during the meetings that are conducted over video calls.
- Limit the software installation permissions on the machines to the company IT team only. This will avoid possible installation of additional software's that aid the virtual control of machines by unauthorized users.

It is a very important factor that the companies should focus on the security of the machines that contain sensitive information. These minor steps will ensure that the machine is accessed by the right candidate and compromising on the security may lead to an irreversible damage that affects the relationship between the clients and service providers.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

I believe that a proper management measures at an organization level can yield the same or more work with quality in the remote setting and all it takes is a proper planning around the team working style. In general the output and quality from a



remote work setting should be more in comparison to an office setting as the employees do not need to take the stress and time to commute every day as they can start the work day with a fresh and relaxed mind. There is no need to micro managing the team members but by identifying the gaps in current setting and introducing few modifications to the current work style can result in miracles to the organizations. These measures will also ensure that all the team members share equal burden that results to happy employees, employer and obviously the clients.

REFERENCES

1. Forbes.com 30May2018 Top 15 Tips To Effectively Manage Remote Employees
2. Bond-Bernard, Fletcher & Steyn (2016). Exploring the influence of instant messaging and video conferencing on the quality of project communication. *Acta Structilia*. 23 (1) 36-69.

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