

GET REMOTE WORK DONE

*How to thrive and lead in a
modern flexible workplace*

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to priya
the wind beneath my wings

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

There are many reasons to read this book

- If you are joining a remote team and want to get a head start
- If you want to be more effective in a remote team
- If you are struggling with having a good work-life balance while working remotely
- If you run a remote team and want your team to function better
- If you are a leader deciding whether to grow your team as fully remote
- If you want to set up the best practices and tools for remote work

What is not in this book:

I intentionally do not talk about specific software tools for remote working in this book. First of all, specific software tools become popular quickly and fall out of grace even faster. Second, I wanted to write about generic ways of solving remote challenges which are universally applicable. The one exception is email which is here to stay and which, in my opinion will still be around at the end of time.

WHY YOU SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

I started working remotely about 15 years ago, first collaborating with people around the world on open-source software development, then with a growing team to build various software products at CodeLathe, the company I founded.

From day one, CodeLathe was a fully remote company. As we grew, our business spanned 15 countries and 6 continents, growing to a large team. During all those years, I worked in different roles ranging from an individual contributor, a team lead and leader of the entire remote team. I made a lot of mistakes over those years, but I also learned a lot more about how not to make them again. This book is an attempt to share all that I discovered.

They say someone becomes an expert after 10,000 hours of doing something (or 3 hours a day for around 10 years). Whether I am an expert on remote work is debatable, but I have spent a considerable amount of time wrangling over these issues and figuring out solutions as the company grew.

As always, there is no one true way of doing things and as such, I don't profess that this book is going to espouse that one true way. However, if I can condense what I have learned into something that helps anyone who reads this book, be slightly better, be slightly more productive and accomplish a fraction more, I think I have done what I set out to do.

Rest assured that there is a lot to learn. Working remotely is not that easy and it doesn't work without a lot of intentional effort to make it successful. I know this because I am still learning. A book like this can only be viewed as a living document, and will evolve with a life of it's own as my understanding deepens over time.

Your time is invaluable and this book is deliberately written to be short and sweet. Thanks for giving me your time and attention. So read on: hopefully you will get something out of it.

ARE YOU DOING REMOTE WORK?

Before you get started, it might be useful to understand and identify which type of remote work you do, as there are various levels of remote work.

- **Level 1:** Office-based (no remote work)
- **Level 2:** Office-based with 'work from home' option
- **Level 3:** Fully remote (single time zone)
- **Level 4:** Fully remote and distributed (multiple time zones)

There are also possible combinations of the above.

The flexible, modern, remote workplace I discuss in this book occurs when you are at Level 3 or higher. I also discuss why the 'work from home' option has serious problems in the later part of the book.

Chapter Two

PHILOSOPHY OF REMOTE WORK

Every person is truly unique with different aspirations, goals and superpowers. However, that individuality is lost in office-based workplaces because they require you to conform in terms of where you work and when you work.

A remote workplace changes everything. It provides you the flexibility and ability to prioritize what is important in your life while allowing you to be effective and still contribute towards your career goals. This is truly empowering and provides incredible freedom.

That incredible freedom comes with a price, since you really need to adjust your thinking on how to approach Remote Work.

REMOTE IS AN ATTITUDE

Working remotely is not about where you physically work from, it is an attitude. It is also a way of organizing yourself, a team, a company so that ultimately work gets done without the crutches that an office provides. It is a way of working, where people ultimately are more results-driven, where outcomes matter and where, how you dress or how you look or whether you are close to the manager does not matter.

Working remotely is ultimately about the flexibility of work, especially in a tightly interconnected world.

Remote Work levels the playing field and brings out purely what someone is capable of without any judgment of how they behave in non-work scenarios.

Working remotely makes people productive in many ways, obviously by cutting down the commute, but also in many non-obvious ways like cutting down interruptions, ensuring a much better work-life balance and so on. It also formalizes processes and communications because people can no longer depend on walking into someone's cube and asking them to explain how things work.

With all that being said, Remote Work remains a bit controversial and has its proponents and opponents. It has been hailed as a savior as well as vilified endlessly when things go wrong.

Remote Work can reduce and remove the human and social aspects of work and dehumanize work to an extreme to the point that it can make it harder to sympathize when people fail. There are ways around this of course, as we will talk about in the 'Overcoming Challenges' chapter.

When you recognize that Remote Work is not a panacea and that you are just trading one set of problems for another, it helps you adjust faster to what is needed. Without that understanding, however, Remote Work can fail in spectacular ways.

REMOTE IS TRUST

The single most important ingredient for Remote Work to succeed is trust.

Members in a team have to trust each other.

Leaders of teams have to trust their team members.

Without trust, remote simply doesn't work.

If you are a leader, assume everyone in your remote team has the best intentions to do the best job possible. If they are failing, they are missing something: potentially proper guidance or clear communication of expectations. But you have to start by trusting that they are trying their best to do a good job. That is the fundamental building block. You should continue to trust, until you are proven wrong many times over a long period of time before deciding otherwise.

If you are working for a remote company that tracks work hours, that is a huge red flag. If your company believes that sitting in front of a screen is a measure of anything, leave alone productivity, they are very wrong. Be very afraid.

In a real remote environment, the amount of freedom you have will be a little scary. If this is the first time you are working remotely after working at an office-based setup, you should be feeling a little anxious that there is no one peeking over your shoulder, seeing what you are up to.

It is truly remote when there is no one to limit the number of cute cat videos you are bingeing on, or there is no one to ask why you are catching up on an hour of sleep during the middle of the day, or there is no one to ask why you suddenly decided to take a longer lunch.

People should just trust you to do your job. And you should be worthy of that trust!

Chapter Three

KEY RULES

It often bears repeating, Remote Work is not better or worse than working out of an office. It is just very different. So, trying to use the same guidelines from office-based work for remote workplaces just doesn't work very well.

Here are a few guidelines that appear to significantly impact how effective Remote Work is.

MANAGING YOUR WORKPLACE

- Separate Work and Life
- Respect your Workplace
- Invest in your Workspace
- Keep a Schedule

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

- Share Accomplishments, Not Presence
- Overcommunicate
- Be Concise
- Write Well
- Be Polite

INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE

Be Responsive
Be Engaged
Be Authentic
Watch the Tone
Sleep over it
Cultural Awareness
Better Meetings

BECOMING CONSISTENT

Get Things Done
Be Self-Driven
Use Good Judgment
Be Detail Oriented
Do Warm Hand-offs

MANAGING YOUR WORKPLACE

SEPARATE WORK AND LIFE

Have a work space that is completely separate from your living space.

Ideally, this space should be a separate room with a door. Having a room with a door allows you to disable all your distractions so that you can't hear the game blaring on the TV or your kids. If you don't have that luxury, then your workspace can still be a nook or a corner in a room.

Use your workspace only for work. Don't do personal work in your workspace. Don't hang out in that workspace. Having these separations allows you to switch your mind quickly from doing work to not doing work.

The act of walking into that workspace is your commute to the office (even if it is the shortest commute in the world). The act of sitting down in that space is a clear signal to your brain that you just arrived and have to start working.

RESPECT YOUR WORKPLACE

Don't work in your pajamas.

Don't work in bed.

Get up, shower, dress and then commute (by taking a few steps) to your workspace and then start working. Just because you are working from home, it doesn't mean you can sit in your bed or couch and walk around in your fluffy bunny slippers. It is important to send the signal that you are in work mode by dressing well and treating a remote work day as if there is no difference from working at an office.

You are expected to be professional at your office; your remote workplace is no different.

INVEST IN YOUR WORKSPACE

Ensure you have an ergonomic workspace, where you can work comfortably for an extended period of time.

When I started working remotely, I started with consumer grade office furniture. Consumer grade furniture works great for casual use but it just doesn't provide the ergonomics needed to make sure you have good posture and support. So after working for a bit, I had debilitating carpal-tunnel pain that shutdown any sort of work for about two to three weeks. I had to switch to an ergonomic mouse and keyboard, upgrade to standing desks and had to take regular forced breaks every twenty minutes to fully recover.

A good remote company will allow you to get the best possible tools and equipment needed to be successful, but even if they don't provide it, invest in the right hardware, furniture and equipment using your own resources.

You owe that much to your body and extended health.

KEEP A SCHEDULE

Work-life balance is a myth. It doesn't exist. There is skew towards work or towards life at any point in time.

But remote work makes it harder to keep boundaries between them. Just as you need boundaries for work spaces, you need boundaries for work time.

Set up consistent times when you start work.
Set up consistent times when you stop work.
And stick to it.

Remote Work allows you to work crazy hours, but just because you can, it doesn't mean you should.

Have a regular work schedule that doesn't change much day by day. It helps you get into a sustainable rhythm for extended periods of time.

However, just because you have fixed hours, it doesn't mean that you cannot change them, if required. Sometimes your work requires you to work with someone who is in a totally different time zone. You will have to make adjustments to your schedule to make that successful.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

SHARE ACCOMPLISHMENTS, NOT PRESENCE

Many people new to remote work are anxious to show their presence or the fact that they are busy doing things.

They respond instantly to messages or emails just to indicate they are working and active.

But this is usually not needed, instead, it is better to share a list of things accomplished at the end of the week with your manager or team. Talk it out with your leader to decide on the cadence.

Sharing outcomes is more impressive and shows real work is getting done. After all, instantly replying to messages doesn't indicate that you are actually working efficiently. In fact, it often means the opposite.

OVERCOMMUNICATE

Remote Work is about keeping open lines of communication. If you ever wonder whether you need to escalate something to your team or leader, then you probably should.

Take the extra effort to keep people in the loop, as appropriate.

If you are sharing too much information and anyone has a problem with it, they will let you know.

No one has ever gone wrong sharing more information. So error on the side of too much rather than too little.

BE CONCISE

'Brevity is the soul of wit` - Shakespeare

When you write something, remember it is being read by many people on the chat channel or email.

If you write long, verbose content, you are wasting the precious time of everyone who has to read, process, and understand what you just wrote.

Write for simplicity.

Write for consumption.

Write so that each word conveys the right meaning, nothing more, nothing less.

Keep emails short, say not more than 5 lines. If you have to go longer, always provide a summary.

Remove unnecessary platitudes, salutations, small talk. Format for legibility, break up contents in logical blocks. Add visual cues like underlines or **bold** to emphasize your point.

WRITE WELL

‘Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.’ - Benjamin Franklin

Writing well is a superpower.

In Remote Work, you will write a lot. In fact, a majority of your communication in a remote job will be through writing.

Learn to write well. Then learn to write even better. Keep improving. This will be the single most impactful thing that will help in a remote work environment.

BE POLITE

'When you have to kill a man, it costs nothing to be polite.' -
Winston Churchill

Since remote communication can completely remove the other cues you get when talking to a person face-to-face, make sure you go out of your way to be polite and respectful.

Even when discussing problems or issues, focus on the issue at hand rather than the person and it never hurts to add a please, or a thank you.

INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE

BE RESPONSIVE

Any message sent to you that needs your attention (could be a reply or an action) typically cannot go unanswered for more than 24 hours. Take time beyond that and you will find more and more people prefer to call you to talk to you because they know they cannot get your response back in a timely manner.

This causes additional stress for everyone who needs to communicate or work with you.

Make it easier for them and for you by responding promptly.

BE ENGAGED

You will spend a lot of time working with your remote team. It is quite easy to be detached and aloof, minding your own work and not really participating in chat, banter or discussions.

But do make the effort to engage with your team. This is hard work and it can be a bit distracting, but makes work way more fun. Participating in discussions, reacting to things happening and just actively being part of your team will also be more fulfilling in the long run.

BE AUTHENTIC

It is harder to know people well in remote work. This is not that unusual to understand when you realize you don't eat lunch together or people can't really drop in to your office space with pictures of their kids or their latest vacation.

So to really get to know people, you have to share a bit of yourself. Find opportunities to share who you are, what your interests are etc. This will lead to you learning more about others over time as they open up as well.

Be yourself. Don't put on a show. It is harder to keep up appearances and people can see through it.

WATCH THE TONE

'People may hear your words, but they feel your attitude.' - John C Maxwell

Remote is hard when you are not face-to-face with people.

Things that are easy to pick up in person cannot be seen or felt while working remote. And in some ways those are the most important things that can be conveyed in a conversation.

In communication, more than the content itself, the tone by which something is delivered is what is remembered. The message is lost; the tone is always remembered. An innocuous sentence or a word can be easily picked up out of context and can cause rancor.

Re-read what you write before posting to ensure it comes across correctly. This is especially important if you are working across many different countries and cultures. What is considered normal in one part of the world can be completely rude in another.

SLEEP ON IT

'Get mad, then get over it.' - Colin Powell

Someone screwed up, or someone unfairly blamed you? Take a deep breath. Take 24 hours before you hit that reply button.

However mad you might be, take some time to ponder and then respond. It will not seem that important anymore!

CULTURAL AWARENESS

When working across different time zones, it is highly likely that you will be working with a diverse set of people. This introduces a specific set of problems because there is no shared context on the acceptable social norms that everyone agrees upon. This requires effort from the leaders and the team to ensure that everyone is aware of such differences and to be sensitive to those needs.

When cultural norms are being flouted inadvertently, the leader must make the effort to correct and explain the problem.

BETTER MEETINGS

'Meetings are terrible' - Anonymous

Meetings suck up time. They need undivided attention and endless meetings can be tiring as they make your brain switch from one set of problems to another as you dial into each meeting.

This can become worse if your meetings happen with breaks in between. The breaks between meetings are quite unproductive as you can never get started on a longer task using that time. So, to be productive, try to organize your time so that you bunch all of your meetings as much as possible in a day and if possible, keep a few days in a week relatively meeting-free. You will find those days are the ones that you do your best work.

If you have to have meetings, start them on time and make sure everyone in the team understands the importance of starting on time as well. This is especially important for meetings with a large number of participants.

Keep meetings to the point and don't let a few people monopolize the conversation. If you need other people's input, ensure they have a chance to talk, by directly asking them for feedback or comments. This also ensures that people pay attention to what is being discussed during the call. Remote meetings can easily be a way for people to zone out or multi-task especially if they don't need to contribute. Break this habit by asking open-ended questions like 'Brad, what do you think?' to wake people up.

BECOMING CONSISTENT

'Trust is built with consistency' - Lincoln Chafee

If I said remote work is about trust, then you will need to be trustworthy.

When you start in a remote job, the key is to be consistent and prove to people that you are dependable.

Usually, that means just doing what you say you will do every single time.

GET THINGS DONE

'It always seems impossible until it's done' - Nelson Mandela

Getting things done is about outcomes and accomplishing objectives, regardless of the hurdles and challenges encountered. It is the primary way you increase your value to your team. It is also the most visible indicator of your effectiveness to your team members and leaders.

At CodeLathe, the ability to get things done is so important that it is one of our company's three core values. It is also one of the key metrics during annual performance reviews at the end of the year.

BE SELF-DRIVEN

Since remote work focuses on output and results to such a large degree, people who are more intrinsically motivated do much better than people who are doing the work just because it pays the bills.

It goes without saying, working remotely on a job you really like will make you happier and make you more productive.

Being self-driven also goes hand in hand with taking pride in high quality work. You work without being micromanaged and deliver excellence. Every single time.

USE GOOD JUDGMENT

'You can develop good judgment as you do the muscles of your body - by judicious, daily exercise.' - Grenville Kleiser

Good judgment is considering all the actions, thinking before acting and making good decisions. This is harder than you think and it can only be improved with time and experience.

Know when to escalate issues, how to communicate them and what channels to use.

For example:

Something unimportant can be just sent via email.

Something that needs quick action might need an email and a chat message.

Something that is super urgent needs a phone call right now.

BE DETAIL ORIENTED

‘The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.’ - George Bernard Shaw

When getting instructions, ask clarifying questions. Think it makes you look dumb if you ask questions? It makes you look a whole lot worse when you do the wrong thing. It is easy to completely miss what is being communicated when people have totally different contexts. Asking questions will save you hours of rework.

Say, ‘So if I understand you correctly, you mean that...’

Or say, ‘To summarize our discussion, here’s what we will do...’

DO WARM HAND-OFFS

'When you throw the ball over the fence, make sure someone is there to catch it!' - Anonymous

If you need to let someone know about a problem that needs to be handled, it is your responsibility that the message and the potential urgency is noticed and understood.

This is called a 'warm hand-off'.

Make sure warm hand-offs are done using the right communication tools. Shooting off an email and assuming it is someone's problem is a surefire recipe for disaster.

Make sure it reaches the recipient by using the right channels (using your judgment) and then ensure they understand clearly that they are responsible for the next action.

Chapter Four

ORGANIZING FOR SUCCESS

What follows is a set of personal productivity hacks that works wonderfully in a remote work environment but is still universally applicable.

TOP 3 THINGS

'Focus on doing the right things instead of a bunch of things' - Mike Krieger

One of the hardest things to do is to figure out the things you need to work on every day. This problem exists regardless of whether you are remote or in an office-based setting.

Each day, you will need to be self-driven and be able to work towards completing things.

The best way to do that is to write down the top 3 things that you need to get done today. Write this down so you always can see it; use a notebook next to your computer, if possible.

This helps you focus on the things you need to do. Regardless of the interruptions during the day, you can always get back to the list.

So why 3, why not 5 or 10? In a given day, it is hard to focus on more than 3 things to get done. If you make your list too long, you will never get any of it done.

ZERO INBOX

'Email is a necessary evil' - Anonymous

Much maligned, email has become the favorite thing to bash when discussing productivity. Experts lament the amount of email we get per day and how it saps most of our work hours. A 2019 study by Adobe found that most workers spend up to 3 hours in a work day¹ managing, responding and replying to email.

Email can be problematic and it can even become useless if left unchecked. This is especially a problem for Remote workers who interact primarily through email. But with a few steps and a clear process, the email you send and receive can be subdued and be completely under your control.

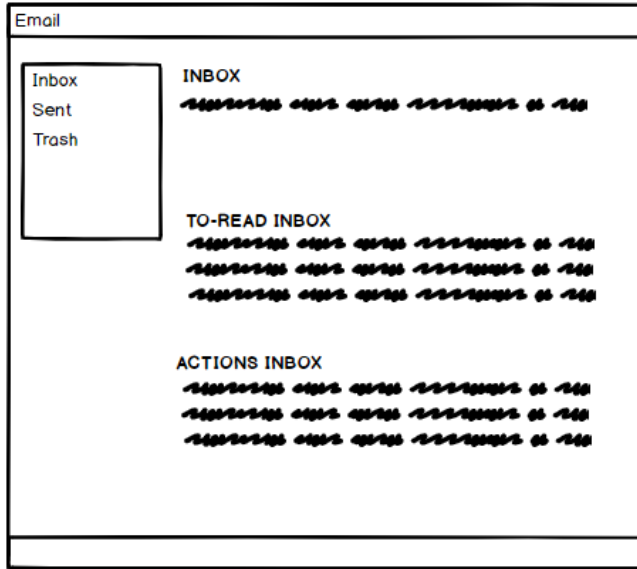
First, email should be sent judiciously. Send it only to make people aware of important information. Remember that too much email can overwhelm people to the point that they are completely ineffective in managing it.

The trick for taking back control of your own inbox is simple and uses some ideas from Merlin Mann's productivity approach towards email called **Inbox Zero**.

Inbox Zero is about keeping your inbox clear or almost empty so that you clearly know what actions, if any, are needed by quickly glancing at your inbox.

If your email program allows it create multiple inboxes.

1. <https://cmo.adobe.com/articles/2019/9/if-you-think-email-is-dead--think-again.html#gs.136wvs>



Let's call them

- REGULAR INBOX (this is where new emails come in)
- TO-READ INBOX (informational emails to be read later at leisure)
- ACTIONS INBOX (emails waiting for an action, and which need follow up later)

Scan and process your email once every 2 to 3 hours. If your job revolves around processing email, then this frequency has to be much higher of course.

When scanning, read the email:

- If you need to do nothing, just delete it
- If it is a low priority item that you just need to read later, move it to the TO-READ INBOX folder so you can read it later
- If you need to take an action asap, leave it in the INBOX.

Now only the emails that need action are in the INBOX.

- If you can do the action needed in the email immediately (within a few minutes) just do it, reply and delete the mail

- If you need more time to do the action, leave it in the INBOX for another time
- If the action requires you to follow up with someone at a later time, send them an email and move it to the ACTIONS inbox

Scan the INBOX every day to work on pending emails.

Read the TO-READ INBOX every few days and delete emails once read.

Scan the ACTIONS INBOX every few days to see if anything has received a response. If you haven't received a response for something, send a follow up.

That's it for total email nirvana.

WRITE IT DOWN

Never trust your memory. Pick a few basic systems to track what you need to get done and simply trust them.

If your email inbox is your to-do list, send tasks in emails to yourself. If you use a to-do app, then make sure to add work items to the list once you need to track them.

If you need to track dates and times, use a calendar and add tasks as events.

Whatever you pick, stick to it and then feel relieved from the stress that you are carrying around on your shoulders.

One thing to realize is that this list has to be actively pruned. A long list is a dead list since you will never venture through it every day. If your list is getting too long, get rid of a few things which haven't been done for the past few months.

REDUCE INTERRUPTIONS

Context-switching is mentally exhausting.

Multi-tasking reduces productivity, leaving you feeling overwhelmed, and even lowers your attention span.

So every time you get interrupted by your phone, a co-worker, or the door, you are switching from a deep zone of focus to something trivial. It takes a lot of time to switch back to the task at hand.

So do yourself a favor: if you need to hunker down and get in the zone, turn off the distractions, mark yourself with a 'do not disturb' sign and get your best work done.

SEPARATE CHUNKS OF WORK

Separate your day into chunks of time and do one specific type of task during each time block.

For example, reserve a few hours of the day for interacting with clients, then a few hours for working on what you need to get done and then the next few hours on the phone calling people. This type of compartmentalization helps you be more productive and focused as you are only thinking about one thing at a time.

Chapter Five

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

This chapter focuses on overcoming specific challenges that are unique to the remote work environment and not found in an office based setup. The solutions are especially useful for remote team managers but meant to help anyone who struggles with the downsides of Remote Work.

LONELINESS

'Humans have a deep innate need to sit around a fire. To connect with others.' - Anonymous

One of the worst things about Remote Work is the fact that you become more and more withdrawn without face-to-face interactions.

To combat this, have a healthy social life outside of work.

Go hang out with your friends, find meaningful ways to contribute, volunteer, go to meet-ups, work out of a co-working space, talk to strangers.

Travel. Find meaning and relationships outside of work.

FEELING DOWN

Real life always finds a way to break the best laid plans of mice and men.

There will be many ups and downs that a person goes through over time.

The important thing to do when you are down is to talk to your manager. Let them know what you are going through, so they can give allowance for that fact and when your results/outcomes dip, they know that this is just a patch you are going through, and they are sympathetic.

The worst thing to do at this time is to withdraw into your own shell without any communication.

It might be possible to know something is wrong when you work from an office, but with remote work, no one knows anything unless you tell them.

So tell them.

LESS HUMAN

'I see humans, but no humanity' - Anonymous

It is easy to dehumanize people in a remote work environment. If you are in charge of a team, make as much effort as you can to make sure that doesn't happen.

Ask your team to have good profile pictures that clearly shows their face everywhere. Find a way to learn more about the person behind the screen. It can be through company-wide talent show events, or it can be through replying to silly trivia questions every week.

Really ask people how they are doing and be really interested in the answer.

Have a 'casual' channel to share random things; let people be people and be themselves.

Find ways to celebrate milestones, including birthdays, work anniversaries, promotions or just a job well done.

MIXED TEAMS

Remote works when it is a level playing field for the entire team.

Team and company leaders can't have it both ways. They can't have a successful remote team while at the same time keeping a big office-based team. For remote to work, everyone has to be on an equal footing. Your team's tools and processes can never scale to work effectively in a remote setup if there is a segment of a team that never has to work remotely. In that case, the people who work remotely will be at a distinct disadvantage, and that disadvantage will worsen over time. Eventually, the remote workers will feel alienated and excluded to the point that their work and performance suffer.

Decide if you are going for a remote work environment or you want everyone in the office and then stick to it. Vacillating will hurt you in many different ways since it takes a lot of time and investment to build an effective work environment. By trying to maintain two, you will end up doing a poor job in both.

This is one of the mistakes we made, when after growing remotely for many years, we thought it might be more impressive to someone outside to see a large office filled with many cubicles and people and buzzing with activity. So we made some local hires at our headquarters location.

What a colossal mistake!

We found that when people work locally at a office, direct communication happens without going through regular channels and the remote team was left in the dark leading to a lot of new problems.

When we hired locally, we also limited our candidates to those who were 'available' instead of the best talent. When people worked

from the office, we also realized that it was harder to tell purely how good they were because things were masked by their personalities and the rapport they created. It was harder to know when someone was under performing.

We learned the lesson. And this is the primary reason why some people working from the office and others fully remote is not sustainable over the long term.

ONBOARDING

One measure of a good remote team is how good the onboarding experience is.

In an office, you can take new employees around the workplace, introduce them to people, and show them how things work. For Remote Work a more structured onboarding process is needed.

The first meeting of a new hire should be with the most senior manager in your organization to set the tone. The senior manager should talk about the history of the team, the structure, what their overall goals are, and what is expected out of them.

After that first meeting, there should be a hand-off to someone else, say, an HR person or a manager who will clearly identify the next steps for the next 2 to 3 weeks - where to go for questions, what to do etc.

Ideally all of this should be codified in a checklist that can be followed along by the new employee.

For bonus points, pair them up with a mentor who can show them the ropes.

To go hand in hand with a good onboarding experience, you should have a good training program. Ensure every team member learns the ropes for a few weeks before they actually start work.

POOR PERFORMANCE

If you have onboarded people correctly and provided clear expectations of outcomes and timelines, then most people will have a fair idea of what is expected and will be able to deliver performance close to expectations.

But, there are still several problems that could show up, which manifest in one of these three areas:

1. Not having the skills to do the job required

Problems like someone making basic mistakes, lacking the basic technical skills, or not having the background to understand what is needed, are the easiest to fix. Give better job training, assign a more senior team member to mentor the new member, or spend time with the new member providing guidance (not-micromanaging) about the job and what corrections are needed. A frank discussion as soon as problems arise, providing course corrections as needed usually fixes these issues quickly. However, continued poor performance after these discussions might mean that the person is not a fit for this specific role.

2. Not getting along with others

This is a bigger problem and usually harder to fix. Communicating the issue to the person is important so they understand what is going wrong. Since this can be a tough conversation, talking about the problem, not the person usually is helpful. If there are no improvements after a few discussions, it is possible that the person is not a good fit for the company.

3. Not aligned with team's culture

Culture is usually the set of shared beliefs on what's most important for a team. This can be unspoken or formalized. But

problems can arise when a new team member doesn't align with that and insists on doing their own thing. Again, this needs to be discussed quickly to see where the fundamental disconnect is. Most likely it is because the new member doesn't yet understand the team's core values and that they are going against the culture. Taking the time to explain shared values and their importance usually is sufficient.

For most of these issues, direct communication is the key. Problems pile up when you don't communicate when things go wrong, so don't let that happen, give negative feedback quickly and in great detail.

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

It can be a challenge to provide meaningful performance reviews in a remote work environment. So the best thing to do here is to make the performance feedback multi-dimensional for the employee, by not only providing manager feedback but also feedback from other team members who work with them. This provides a good balanced perspective of their performance.

In terms of the actual performance form itself, it helps to provide feedback on aspects that are important in remote work.

Here's an example of a performance feedback template that can help:

FACTORS

1. Competence
2. Quality of Work
3. Timeliness
4. Communication and Teamwork
5. Getting Things Done

Each factor has a rating of 1 through 5, where

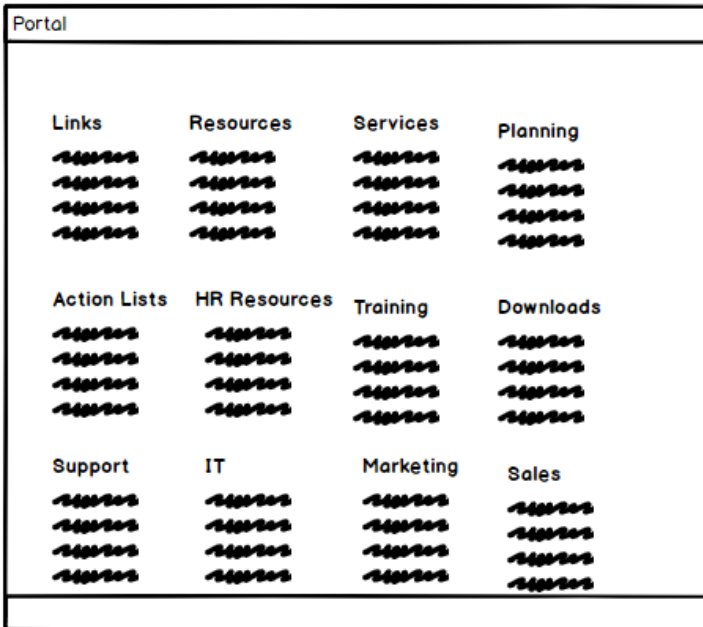
- 5 means above expectations
- 3 means meeting expectations
- 1 means below expectations

WHERE IS EVERYTHING?

A significant chunk of time can be spent by team members figuring out where to go for the information they need.

It is important to have a single place(or portal) where they can get to all team resources. This allows people to find things quickly without having to remember every single separate location. Label things neatly and organize them. Ensure that everything is updated regularly so that information remains current.

This could be just a simple landing page with a bunch of links.



Make sure things are written including processes, procedures and team manifestos (or how we work). For example, all our support

team's processes from 'how to help a customer', to 'how to setup a screen sharing session' are completely documented and kept up to date.

TEAM BONDING

'The things people really want are love, connection, and purpose' -
Mallika Chopra

Team bonding is really about creating trust between team members, so that they can depend upon each other when working towards a common purpose. This can primarily be improved by meeting in-person, learning more about each other and working tightly over an extended period of time.

In a remote work environment, the best way for teams to bond is meeting in-person once in a while. You will discover that it completely alters how people work with each other and helps everyone get along much better. Make sure you setup opportunities for that to happen. Even if it is only once a year, somehow get the team together in one room.

At CodeLathe, every year, we try to setup a company wide meet-up at an international destination. Everyone flies in for a few days of fun and returns back home, having a better understanding of their team mates and everyone else they work with.

WORKING ACROSS TIME ZONES

Remote Work across time zones can be challenging.

Coordination of meetings and calls becomes next to impossible.

It is much easier if there are a few hours of overlap where most of the team is generally online and available. All meetings and discussions can then happen easily.

In my team, with more than 8 time zones, scheduling meetings was downright impossible. So, we now have some core fixed hours everyday that overlap across time zones when everyone is expected to be available. This makes a tremendous difference.

VIDEO CONFERENCING

Video calls are a double-edged sword. While it is great to see people on camera and connect more with each other, it can be fatiguing when done for all meetings or in meetings with a large number of people.

Video calls are tiring because they require you to sit in one place for long hours, staring intently at the screen while checking out internally. This is not very comfortable for most people.

People also have to tidy up their rooms and their appearance while on camera; that adds additional strain.

Use video calls judiciously. Use them specifically as preludes to team meetings where everyone can sit around talking, joking and connecting not specifically about work. That's when they work very well.

REMOTE TEAM CULTURE

In general, you cannot really wake up one day and say that you will create a culture. Culture reflects the realities of the people who work together every day, the kind of decisions they make and what is considered as acceptable.

So culture is a by-product of what you do consistently over time as an individual, a team or a company. Make sure you keep doing the right things and that will eventually become your culture.

TEAM ACTIVITIES

Organizing team activities is tough to do remotely, but here are few ideas that work well.

Photo Scavenger Hunts

Split your team into small groups (usually a max of four), and then every week provide a list of topics that every person in the team has to post pictures of. Examples are 'something hot', 'something moving' and so on. At the end of the week, points are tallied per team. After a few weeks, the team with the most points wins.

A variation of this is to post animated gifs (original ones if you want to make it even harder).

Talent Shows

Hold talent shows, where each contestant creates a video of their talent or skill and then compile it as a show that everyone watches together and votes on to choose a winner. This is always fun and a great way to get to know your team quite well.

Steps Challenge

Have a company wide challenge to count steps with leaderboards. For variety, make it a team based competition. It is fun and healthy!

TOO MUCH NOISE

Eventually, as the team grows, most communication channels used by teams become noisy and hard to use. This is true for all types of channels including text chat, email etc. The tipping point for these is when the channel becomes less and less useful. For example, if you find all your team channels filled with chat that you can never keep up with, then you know you have a problem.

Address those problems swiftly by doing the following:

- Break large distribution groups into smaller groups to make communication more relevant
- Remind people to only send high quality communication to large groups

Chapter Six

TOOLS

This chapter focuses on communication, tools and systems needed to work effectively remotely. The tools discussed are particularly useful if you are setting up or managing the office of a remote company, but the information will also help team members understand and more effectively use the methods of communication and resource management in their remote environment.

ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

Asynchronous communication is a form of communication that does not require both people to be online at the same time to communicate with each other.

Email is the perfect example of an asynchronous communication tool. You can send an email and then a reply comes back (if it ever does) back sometime later.

For working remotely, powerful asynchronous communication tools are required since most of your team is not going to be online at the same time.

The problem with email is that communication is locked away in inboxes and limited to the people who are copied on that email. It is also harder for new people who join your team to discover all this communication that is locked away in emails.

The solution is to use team-wide discussion forums or similar software that allows topics and areas to be discussed in depth and the results to be archived for all eternity.

Chat can also be considered as an asynchronous communication tool, as long as everyone in the team understands it is asynchronous. If people get upset that replies take hours then you might want to set the expectations right.

SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

Synchronous communication tools require people to be online at the same time to work. Typical examples are chat, voice calls, and video calls.

Since these tools require people to be online and available at exactly the same time they are not always effective for people spread across different time zones as they now need to find a time that works for everyone.

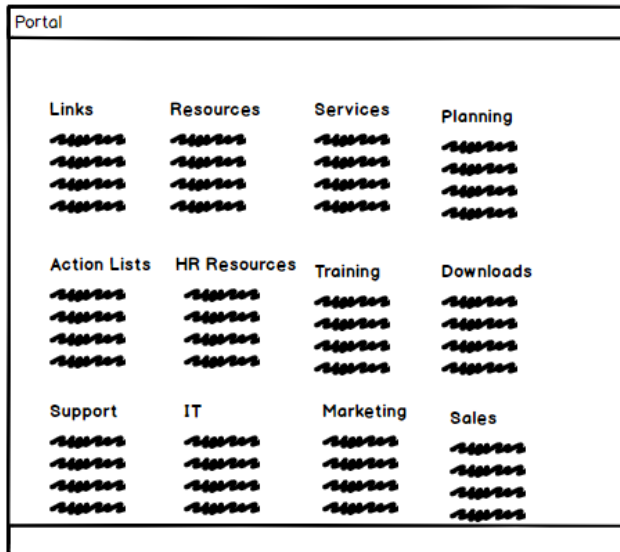
If your organization communicates mostly via synchronous communication, then it becomes extremely hard to be fully remote. It is remote in location but not remote in execution.

PORTALS

In addition to tools for communication, a fully remote company requires a way for new people in the team or even existing members to quickly find information. A unifying portal that brings all resources together in one single landing page is required to effectively organize all the information.

Typically, a central wiki is a great example of such a resource.

This portal would be structured like the search engines of old. (Yahoo! Anyone?)



Basically, it is a page full of links that is updated regularly. Everyone opens this page to find the location of a resource.

REPOSITORIES

How important are communication artifacts? Surprisingly, the answer is not really that much. Most communication is transient and quickly becomes out of date and irrelevant.

A way to think of this is that 99% of emails don't need to be stored long-term and can be archived or deleted once you are done either replying to or reading them.

However, outside of communication, there are still certain hard requirements for information that require long-term archiving or storage. Most payroll records, financial transactional invoice data, tax information and documents that record significant or critical business information need a proper archive and a central storage repository.

Therefore, it is important to pick a central repository for your business to store mission-critical data and organize it in a way that is quickly accessible for everyone in your organization.

ACTION LISTS

Communication and artifacts are one thing that require a system, and tracking action items the other. It is important to ensure that there is a team or company-wide system that clearly shows the next set of work items.

Typically, many teams just use emails or a ticketing system as their work items or action list. But in addition to the daily work list, there are higher order actions to be done over the course of weeks or months or years.

This is the difference between tasks that you do on a day to day basis that keep the business running (tactical) vs overall goals or process changes that prepare your business to handle tomorrow (strategic).

Make sure both tactical and strategic tasks are written down and easily available for all your teams.

STATUS REPORTING

A remote team runs on trust but team members might always feel they need a way to showcase their output or outcomes to avoid the feeling that their work is not being noticed. One easy way is to have a weekly or bi-weekly status message that is available for anyone interested to see.

People working in one area or function might not be aware that their work may impact or affect other areas or that there are other ramifications of the work they are doing. Distributing that information to everyone becomes challenging. Using team meetings to communicate statuses is ineffective as it either takes too long or wastes time.

Status reports increase the visibility of the work you are doing and raise the awareness of initiatives and new projects across the whole team. Finally, status reports are a work journal for you and help you focus on what needs to be done every week, bringing clarity and purpose.

Status reports should communicate a few essential things:

What you got done last week (Be as specific as you can, details are okay)

What problems or challenges you overcame, and what problems you still face and are working on

What you plan to accomplish or work on next week

Any other information worth sharing (upcoming time-off, achievements outside work, etc)

Here's an example of what a status report should look like

Subject: Status Report week ending 7/17/2019

Accomplished Last Week

- Wrote the new FINRA compliance document and sent it out for review
- Got a new test system to verify the issue seen at the large customer. Looked at 3 different solutions and one looks promising to go with. This is still an open issue.
- Discussions with vendor on possible HR payroll trial. Setup a trial and showed Lisa the ropes.

Next Week

- Continue to work with Lisa on payroll system trial and finalize solution and vendor
- Solve issue reported by customer.
- Publish FINRA compliance document on website and include information in the newsletter for august.

Other

- Out of Office on Vacation 7/18/2019 and 7/19/2019
- Got a blackbelt on Karate last week, Yay!

TRACKING TIME OFF

Time off is about flexibility when working remotely. Allow your team a blanket set of vacation days and allow them to choose which days they take off and which unique holidays they want to celebrate. Maybe they want to take time off for a local holiday which no one else in your team celebrates.

Encourage your team to track their time off in a self-maintained list or spreadsheet accessible by their manager. Track time off only when it is more than half a day of work. It really doesn't matter if employees track time off for doctor appointments, kids pickup/drop off or running quick errands.

A company wide (or a team wide) shared calendar is necessary to allow team members to indicate when they are out on vacation or out of the office. If someone has trouble reaching someone, they can quickly check the shared calendar to see if the person is at work that day.

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION

Congratulations on making it all the way through this book. Remote Work requires a rethink on how you approach work. It brings enormous flexibility and freedom and allows you to live a more balanced and complete life that is more on your terms than office-based work. But understand that it is different and be open to making adjustments. With all that effort and change comes a big payoff.

The key rules discussed during the course of the book can help you be more effective at Remote Work. There are many challenges, but none that cannot be overcome.

As a leader, the fundamental thing you need in a Remote Work environment is **trust**. Given good direction, clear expectations, purpose and then ownership, your team will be able to step up to the challenge and create results.

As a team member, be worthy of that trust by **respecting your workplace, communicating intentionally, getting work done consistently** and finally by **treating everyone as a person**.

As with anything, what matters is starting somewhere and slowly taking small steps forward and getting better. I hope some of the guidelines, strategies and tips help you not only survive but thrive in a remote workplace.

Remote is here to stay and will increasingly be the workplace of choice for many.

Go forth and prosper.

APPENDIX - TOOLS

Here's a list of specific software tools that are generally best in breed as of March 2020.

Asynchronous Tools

- Email: Gmail (supports multiple inboxes)
- Discussion forums: Discourse

Synchronous Tools

- Video calling: Zoom
- Audio calling: Microsoft Skype
- Text chat: Slack, Microsoft Teams, AirSend, Skype
- Whiteboard: Microsoft Whiteboard (Windows only)

Storing Artifacts

- Long term File Storage and Sharing: Microsoft OneDrive, Box, FileCloud

Shared Next Steps

- Portal: Wikis (Confluence, Bookstack)
- Long term work list: Trello, Wiki, Basecamp
- Bug Tracking: YouTrack

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madhan Kanagavel is a founder and CEO of CodeLathe.

Madhan holds a bachelor's in engineering from College of Engineering, Guindy, Chennai India and a master's of science from Boston University, USA. He has lived in Austin since 2014 with his wife Priya and his two children, Aditya and Nila.

Madhan started CodeLathe in 2008 to build the software product Tonido (a personal cloud platform). In 2012, along with his team, he started working on the business file sharing and storage platform FileCloud which has grown to now serve over 3000 enterprise customers across 90+ countries.

CodeLathe builds two main software products today:

FileCloud: FileCloud is an enterprise grade centralized file repository for business which also allows file sharing and sync. It provides a way to archive file artifacts and store them for use across your company. FileCloud is self hosted and runs either on-premises or on any cloud. <https://www.getfilecloud.com>

AirSend: AirSend is a collaboration tool for businesses and professionals built upon the notion that people come first. So it heavily revolves around communication among people, especially among a loosely coupled set of people like clients, vendors and customers. <https://www.airsend.io>

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Thanks to the entire team at CodeLathe for being on this wonderful journey along with me. It wouldn't have been possible without Remote Work. I am inspired and amazed by the sheer talent, tenacity and the commitment towards excellence. You have made the many adjustments necessary to make Remote Work work well as the size of our team increased. Thanks for helping me learn and refine things and putting up with the crazy ideas I have proposed patiently.

Thanks to all my family and friends who have stood by my side. It is easier with you!

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