

How tech founders can scale their business while working remotely

Even as the most challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic recede into memory, it is becoming ever clearer that the changes to the way we work over the past 18 months will leave indelible marks on our professional culture.

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One of the more noticeable impacts, for instance, was the advent of widescale remote working. While this had been a font of discourse in many industries – particularly those that lean on digital platforms to function – for years, the pandemic necessarily changed circumstances. Those who were beginning to implement hybrid models between office and remote setups had to accelerate plans, while devotees of the office formula had their hand forced as stringent social restrictions took hold.

In either case, the unexpected nature of the shift to remote working caught most by surprise, resulting in improvised implementations and a necessary ‘trial by error’ approach. In turn, it has become evident that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach to making remote working viable: under the financial pressures of the pandemic, all companies had to experiment to find a way to maintain their productivity and culture from a distance.

In the broadest possible sense, we can see the past 18 months as a successful trial run for remote working, and a vindication for early adopters. While remote working is not without its drawbacks, the rewards

for businesses and employees have proven highly welcome.

A recent survey conducted by PwC revealed that a striking majority (84%) of employees feel they are able to perform their role just as well in remote setups as they would in a traditional office setting. A different study suggests that 85% of workers are keen for their workplace to embrace a remote or hybrid model, even after returning to full operating capacity following the pandemic.

However, the arrival of mass support for remote working environments must not be considered in isolation due to its formulation during the pandemic. Many businesses concentrated their resources on sustaining core operations and, ultimately, survival. To assess the long-term viability of the remote working model, we must also consider it as applied to businesses looking to scale.

At Studio Graphene, we were fortunate enough to experience rapid growth during this time. Since March 2020, we have welcomed nearly 70 people to our teams across four global studios and have recently hired our 100th employee. Given the innate challenges of scaling across borders in a remote setting during a global pandemic, we encountered a number of barriers to success that required careful consideration to overcome.

The practicalities

It almost goes without saying, but one of the most important aspects of business growth is expanding the team. More accurately, the most critical element is identifying and recruiting appropriate and talented staff. Naturally, from a distance, this can be fraught.

In our experience, the sensible approach was to lean towards caution. We implemented more rounds of interviews for prospective candidates and exposed them to a much larger array of existing team members than we

would have in typical office-based interviews.

By affording potential new hires the opportunity to get to know us better – and vice versa – we were able to feel confident that we were adding someone who could perform the role and contribute to a positive working culture. Naturally, there were hiccups, but we found that experience refined our judgement. Once we began to establish more rigorous tests for personality and cultural fit, our learning curve steepened fast, leading to our established processes today reflecting a far lower-risk hiring practise.

By nature, remote work limits communication among team members. Most experts agree *that up to 93%* of communication is non-verbal. While conversations, meetings and interviews through Zoom afford a number of benefits and efficiencies over meetings in an office, they also naturally limit the ability to sense mood and personality.

While facial cues and tone of voice are still observable, most body language is lost. These may seem finer details – or perhaps trivial – but they can be critical in maintaining a productive and inclusive working environment and identifying emerging issues within a team.

Communicative culture

Much of what makes a remote working environment in a scaling business successful can be implemented on a policy level, but an equally critical aspect is much harder to distil – the challenge of scaling up the workplace culture alongside the business.

Without in-person contact and regular opportunities to socialise, fostering organic connections between teams and between managers and employees can require a degree of finesse and constant sensitivity to the difficulties some team members might face.

One of the upsides of office culture is that socialising can be spontaneous, lending it an authenticity that is hard to capture in remote settings. On a day-to-day level, Zoom allows individuals in distant settings to get a sense of one another, though it can lack some of this organic connection as most video calls will be organised in advance.

Conversely, when relying on messaging software and audio calls for the majority of staff communication, it can be difficult to visualise how to scale a tight-knit culture.

We tried numerous virtual team events and ice breakers between different studios, to some success. In organising these, consideration should be placed on the aforementioned; at their worst, these events will be dismissed by employees as 'forced fun'. The goal should be to involve and engage employees from a variety of professional backgrounds and cultural barriers to foster an appropriate level of connection for the format at hand.

Just as important in establishing an attractive workplace culture is addressing the concerns of employees. For instance, ensuring that nobody feels isolated from the rest of their colleagues is crucial.

Managers must also communicate as clearly as possible the need for workers to put their wellbeing above their productivity. Without the clearly demarcated working hours of an office workspace, many employees suffer with an erosion of the boundary between their work and life. This could be performing excessive and unnecessary overtime to complete tasks quickly, or checking emails and messages out-of-hours.

Over time, this can build up into a pressure on the employee, which managers must be mindful of. Communicating when overtime is – and is not – appropriate for the company or project at hand, and encouraging employees to 'shut down' their computers at the end of the day will do

much to relieve this pressure.

Lessons learnt

It is evident that there is no simple formula for scaling a business across borders remotely. Naturally, there are so many moving parts, from accommodating the management structure and existing teams, to adapting the hiring processes and sustaining a positive workplace culture, that all businesses will need to pay close attention to their particular areas of need. For instance, some companies will require hiring processes that focus purely on skills rather than taking in cultural fit. Others may decide that, given the characteristics of their team, organised social events do more harm than good.

The main lesson, in our experience, has been to constantly assess where practical changes to processes can make remote working a more comfortable managerial experience. In addition to this, it is crucial to consider with care how employees may be challenged by working at a distance from their colleagues, and support them appropriately.

While remote and hybrid working models appear to be here to stay, founders should take advantage of this movement to the benefit of their business. The perks of getting it right are clear: cost savings, heightened access to a wider range of talent from further afield, and a more contented workforce, with greater job satisfaction and a stronger relationship with their employer. Those who handle the transition to a remote model appropriately may find it helps rather than hinders their ambition to scale at pace.

Ritam Gandhi is founder and director at *Studio Graphene*.

