The UK visa system needs to catch up with the new reality

The pandemic upended how we build businesses and work with each other. One of the most significant changes may turn out to be the realisation that it's now possible for most tech companies to build remote teams with people from almost anywhere in the world.

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Not only that, but it's actually a competitive advantage. Why limit yourself to a nearby pond, when you can go fishing for talent in the world's oceans. The best teams will be distributed teams, and competition will drive ever more startups to follow suit.

The only problem is that the UK's visa system is yet to catch up with this new reality, as we recently discovered when *Qatalog* tried to get everyone together for a hackathon in London.

Why Qatalog is remote-first, but still does in-person events

Let's rewind to 2019, when I founded Qatalog. I set out to hire the best people, no matter where they were. It wasn't a very common approach at the time, but having grown up in India and the Middle East, as well as my time at Amazon and Wise building global teams, I knew there were plenty of talented software engineers out there. Then the pandemic hit, and the concept of distributed teams was normalised pretty much overnight.

Almost two years later, the Qatalog team now includes more than 16 different nationalities, speaking 26 languages, working across 10 countries. While our headquarters are in London, we absolutely see ourselves as a global company, internet-first even, full of diverse perspectives and experiences.

This is not without its challenges, however. The various time zones mean that our virtual team 'lunches' are often someone else's breakfast, and another's dinner, which requires us to work a little differently to most companies. There is a strong emphasis on asynchronous communication and Qatalog helps to makes work visible and accessible for everyone, so people can work on their terms, no matter where or when they choose to log on

Despite all of this, time spent together as a team in person remains invaluable, even if it's only for a few days twice a year. Remote work is great for the day-to-day, provided you have the right culture and tools, but if you want to create a sense of collective identity and build more meaningful relationships, there is no replacement for getting everyone together in person. For early-stage startups, where you need absolutely everyone pulling in the same direction, this becomes doubly important.

The visas that never came

This was one of the big motivations for our hackathon in London, where our engineers and designers were tasked with building new product features and improvements in three days. It was a chance for many of them to meet in person, often for the first time.

Unfortunately though, three of them were unable to travel to London, as their visas never came through, despite applying well ahead of time. Two are Indian citizens (one based in Amsterdam and the other in New Delhi), while the other is Turkish and based in Izmir.

Each of them had applied for a 'Standard Visitor Visa', with clearly defined travel dates and plans to be here for no longer than two weeks. Notably, all had been required to apply through outsourced companies, which manage the application process on behalf of the British Embassy. They had been explicitly told this would take no longer than 15-25 working days. But as the hackathon got closer, there was still no sign of the visas, with no information as to why, or how much longer they would need to wait.

In the end they had to join on Zoom, looking on enviously through a screen, while everyone else worked across a table from one another for the first time in almost 2 years.

"Global Britain" isn't so global

With the Government's desire to turn post-Brexit Britain into "Global Britain", with a plan to "attract the best global talent in key science and tech sectors" - we should be bending over backwards to attract top tier software engineers and product designers. However, it's hard to make someone feel welcome if you don't even let them into the country for a two week visit.

One solution would be to give UK startups the ability to issue short-term business travel visas for their full time staff. Each company could get an allowance, based on the number of remote employees, which they could make use of as needed. This approach would give entrepreneurs the confidence they need to keep scaling their business and making remote hires, knowing that they can still get people to the UK when it matters, even at short notice.

Given the huge number of UK startups that have made remote hires over the past couple of years, it seems inevitable that this will start to become a much bigger issue if it isn't addressed, especially now that international

travel is opening up and in person events are returning.

Qatalog added another five people to its engineering team in January alone, with four of those working remotely from Poland, Nigeria, Turkey and India. There's a good chance we'd have exactly the same problem the next time we want to host an event in London. Rather than take that risk, we're already considering making Paris or Amsterdam our 'virtual hub' for future events, despite the fact half of our team is based in the UK. If the problem persists, you might even see some remote first companies decide to locate their headquarters outside the UK.

An urgent issue if the UK is to retain its crown as Europe's tech hub

Anyone building a startup will know that talent is the foundation for success, and having spoken to those prevented from attending the hackathon, it's clear that the experience was sadly quite painful for them. That's why, for any high growth, remote-first startups with plans to build a large distributed team, it's absolutely critical these visa issues are ironed out quickly. Because in a global economy amid a war for tech talent, it's all too easy to look elsewhere, with damaging consequences for retention. That's the kind of thing that keeps founders up at night, and if the UK wants to retain its crown as Europe's tech hub, it needs to act now.

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