Remote Collaboration: Embracing the Change

It’s Monday morning, 8:30 a.m. on the East Coast, at a startup company. The team is already hard at work, demonstrated by a flurry of activity. Stories are being written, and features are being debated. Code is being debugged. A fix is being promoted to production. There is a palpable, purposeful energy about the team members. They’re rested, articulate, comfortable with the stack of complexity surrounding a feature topic being debated. The debate is pointed and energetic. Supporting materials are close at hand. The pair involved in the debate stop to help a colleague, then go back to their debate.

But there is no one at the office. In fact, there is no office. The team is widely distributed over several states and two continents. The finished work is produced faster and is of better quality than what the same team was used to doing when the members were co-located in midtown Manhattan.

What changed? For those us who have lived the corporate lifestyle—the commute, the offices, the travel—the thought that this possibility could actually happen was pretty remote. The idea is probably still pretty remote to those who continue to work in the office buildings in Manhattan and elsewhere. But there is a revolution occurring, both in the cement canyons of the big cities and in the hinterland.

Much has changed, including the obvious developments such as inexpensive fast bandwidth, the increasing reliability of the personal computing environment, and the plethora of available collaboration tools. Most of these have been around in some form for a couple of years. Yet though all of these capabilities are enablers, they’re not drivers.

More than ten years ago, a major bank did a study on telecommuting. This was a revolutionary concept at the time. What the study showed was that the single biggest barrier to telecommuting was middle management. To today, that hurdle is slowly being whittled away. Managers at small companies figured out fairly quickly that changing the mindset around telecommuting was middle management. Today, that hurdle is slowly being whittled away. Managers at small companies figured out fairly quickly that changing the mindset around remote work created significant benefits in savings and productivity (as Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson discuss extensively in their book *Rework*). Even some large companies are now being driven, by the economic realities of the time, to the idea that remote work is not only possible but also desirable for certain groups of people. Getting middle management and some of the leadership over the hurdle is what's changed, and the pace is accelerating.

What does a typical remote work platform look like? Most of the components are inexpensive (or free) and readily available:

1. **A fast Internet connection, at least 5 megabits down and around 1 megabit up.** Why so fast? Because bandwidth quickly becomes a significant issue when you’re waiting for a big file to arrive or you need to host a videoconference with more than one person.

2. **Skype or Google Talk or one of the other many VOIP services available.** The service needs to be very easy to sign up for and use, and it must support inbound and outbound calls from the traditional phone network. Why? Because not everyone is wired, and most people are mobile at some point. The phone needs to ring at the computer, not on another device that may be shared by others at home. Also, the sound quality is so much better on these services that once you have used them, you’ll never go back to a standard land or mobile line. Equally important is integrated Instant Messaging (IM), which is now an integral part of the voice conversation.

3. **Document sharing.** This means different things to different people. This capability lets one or more people see and work on a document together, but not necessarily at the same time. Document sharing lets you present a document or series of documents to one or more people and share your desktop or their desktop. Most important, it lets people who do not have an account on the service participate in conferences. This space is changing quickly. At TraqFast we use Skype, Fuze Meeting, and Yuuguu, and we pay for all of these services. Free is fine, but we need these services to work when we need them. All of them support mixed audio—that is, participants do not have to be on a computer to participate in audio. One of the more interesting developments here is how quickly the iPad has made its presence felt in this area. Fuze supports the iPad as a full-fledged participant, but others do not.

4. **File sharing.** There are many of these services: Box, SugarSync, Jungle Disk, Google Docs. Again, the service needs to be easy to sign up for and easy to use with Macs, PCs and mobile devices. These services are more critical than may be apparent. Being able to quickly and unambiguously get to the right file, of any kind, during real-time collaboration is key to having results that are satisfying from both a work product and participant perspective. Nothing is worse than spending five minutes to e-mail, circulate, or otherwise find the correct document or media asset.
5. **Video.** We use video extensively. It’s not high-quality video as in the typical high-end telepresence setups, but it’s good enough. Video is very useful when working through issues requiring a consensus to be built or involving items that are contentious. Other than that, most of our conversations occur by voice. Of course, video gives a whole new meaning to the notion of “dress codes.”

6. **Enterprise social networking.** This one is in its infancy. At TraqFast, we struggle with its use in our collection of small teams. But it has promise.

7. **Google Apps.** This is an atypical capability. It has the potential of radically influencing both team satisfaction and productivity. But, and this is a big “but,” the use of Google Apps requires teams that are able to break through the traditional notion of collaboration. Creative collaboration has largely occurred in the conference room context—which could just as easily be a coffee shop—and is facilitated with Post-Its, scribbles, flip charts, and so on. Though creativity is the goal, it is typically missing or appears as a muttered comment from one co-worker to another. What Google Apps lets team members do is collaborate on a document, spreadsheet, or drawing in real time. Thus team members can produce near-finished-form output while getting all of the benefits of intense interaction with the other members of the team. But the level of emotional maturity required is high, and the ability to call each other out as the discussion proceeds is critical. Oddly enough, this process can occur with everybody in the same room, each on his or her own workstation, or virtually, with people on a conference call. Video is distracting in these situations. Observing the behavior in these sessions quickly shows that using Google Apps works only with teams whose members are close, have a high degree of mutual respect, are confident, and have checked their egos at the virtual door. Yes, this is true of any great team, but the interesting thing about the real-time collaboration capability of Google Apps is that it makes this greatness obvious. We have found the document-exchange feature to be quite helpful, but it’s the real-time collaboration that is having an impact far out of proportion to the apparently modest feature set of Google Apps.

So, what is the message? At TraqFast, we’ve been successful with telecommuting largely because we have strong off-line relationships that are nurtured through face-to-face relationships. We spend a lot of time together online as well. It is quite frequent for us to have conference calls that last hours but that are more like a few people working together in a room than a traditional conference call. Long periods of silence are expected because the work is proceeding in a shared virtual space; people are problem solving and can call out to each other as needed.

Intellectual and emotional maturity is key to success, as are the usual drivers of trust: competency, availability, and intent. All of our teams represent skills that have been honed over many years in the traditional workforce. Our teams are typically more experienced and more emotionally and socially mature. As this type of workplace becomes more prevalent, one wonders how the new entrants into the workplace are going to acquire the critical soft skills that drive success in such an environment. Today’s educational systems do not guarantee that such skills will be learned. Largely, this is an apprenticeship, usually painful to both the new entrant and the supervisor. How does such an apprenticeship work in an environment in which the team members have to be self-motivated and in which emotional and social maturity is a plus but the signals for this maturity, which are so apparent in person, are difficult to detect?

In short, the message is this: organizations that can embrace the change and deploy these capabilities will deliver a large and positive impact on productivity and quality. How these environments will affect the next generation of students remains to be seen.

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