



How to Lead From Everywhere

Nurturing Talent in a Distributed Team

While it can appear a fairly recent concept, in actual fact distributed teams have been in place for more than half a century. An early pioneer of this business structure was Steve Shirley who formed a business in 1962, called Freelance Programmers. As the name suggests it was a distributed team, comprised of an all-female network of staff operating remotely from their homes around the UK. This was pre-internet of course, and so there was no email, Cloud or intranet for the sharing of work. Instead employees would write down their programming instructions which Royal Mail would collect twice daily and take to London, for computer input.

When the business finally floated as a public company it was valued at £3bn and Steve and 19 original employees became instant millionaires. The intriguing fact about this story is that Steve was actually a woman, operating under a male pseudonym as her business was so ground-breaking for its time. The [TED Talk by Dame Stephanie Shirley](#) is well worth watching.

There's no doubt that distributed teams are becoming increasingly common, and for some businesses there is no 'in office' at all anymore. According to data by TechCast, 30% of workers across industrialised countries will be telecommuting by 2019. Research by Dell shows that 69% of UK employees believe business travel will soon be replaced by other forms of communication.

There's no doubt this is creating a number of challenges for those in leadership. Understanding how to lead and manage distributed talent is becoming critical to most businesses. According to Gihan Perera, most of the literature out there about virtual teams suggests it's an inferior way

of working, compared to having an office-based team. "Often there's the expectation to try and bring a virtual team closer towards the 'in-office' version, as that's been seen as the gold standard of what we should be aiming for," he explains.

But Perera proposes the idea that "maybe the virtual team environment is the more superior way of doing things. Offices have only been around for 200 years since the start of the industrial revolution. What if we took the office environment and tried to make it more like the virtual environment?"

There are five key areas that leaders must consider, when attempting to nurture people and talent within a distributed team, Perera explains...

Build a cohesive team culture

What are the common problems?

Within a distributed team there is naturally less personal rapport, and little or no opportunity for face-to-face personal interaction. It can often be harder for remote

employees to feel like they fit in, and are part of the team. Often there are differing expectations between in-office staff and distributed workers, which can make staying on-task harder. While it's easy for in-office employees to prove themselves through their efforts and commitment, and hence feel an appreciated member of the team; distributed team members can often feel that their hard work goes unrewarded and are unable to see how they fit within the bigger picture.

Perera explains that **trust** is one of the biggest issues affecting distributed teams. In the office, trust tends to be built around personal interaction through shared interests, in-office banter and social engagements outside of work etc. But in a distributed team, trust is built around professional interactions alone. Qualities such as reliability, consistency, integrity and responsiveness therefore become critical. "As a manager this should be good news, as these are the qualities you want within a productive team," argues Perera.

What are the common benefits remote workers can bring to team culture?

When it comes to building a strong team culture, Perera believes a distributed team can help to bring about greater diversity, integrating people from different ethnic cultures, geographies, backgrounds etc.

Co-located teams can also help to avoid difficult workplace scenarios, as individuals are interacting on purely a professional basis. There's less space for personal relationship issues, and more focus on efficiency.

Learn how to collaborate effectively

What are the common problems?

Distributed teams can bring about different dynamics to an in-office team, making effective

collaboration quite tricky. There is also research to show that individuals who work physically closely together are more likely to collaborate effectively; part of that is because it's what they are used to, but human nature is also a factor. Within co-located teams there is the added danger that individuals will work in silos, and that there will be less cross-departmental working.

Perera explains there are three different kinds of collaboration: 'immediate' where people have to be there at the same time e.g. a meeting; 'deferred' which takes place within an individual's own timeframe e.g. via email; and 'independent' where collaboration is an unexpected consequence e.g. Wikipedia. Nowadays there's some great technology and tools such as Sharefile to help facilitate immediate collaboration.

What are the benefits of collaboration within a distributed team?

Perera argues there is a mistaken belief that people don't collaborate as well within a distributed team.

It goes without saying that virtual workers experience less interruptions and distractions, creating more time and flexibility for focused collaboration. According to Perera, online meetings also tend to be more efficient than in-person meetings, as people turn up on time, proceedings start promptly and there's a greater likelihood individuals will stick to the agenda and cover it efficiently. Within a distributed team there is also the scope to be more creative with the technology they're using for collaboration purposes.

Focus on productivity

According to research by AON Consulting, the productivity of effective virtual is or more than

teams *increases* between 10% and 43% depending on the organisation or industry they're in. In several cases, the net increase in productivity is equal to or more than the organisations' savings on office space costs. Part of this reason could be attributed to the fact that most people do their best work when they're not in the office, as Jason Fried outlines in his book "*Remote: Office Not Required*." There also tends to be fewer interruptions and distractions for remote workers, than those who are office based.

Perera asks: "Are you measuring people based upon their efforts or results?" In an office, he says, there's a tendency to measure individuals based on their efforts i.e. are they arriving early or leaving late? Are they committed to being a team player? "But in a distributed team, you don't see when your people are working. So it's important to look at what you're measuring," says Perera. "It's important that leaders of distributed teams spend 'time' with individuals until they get the knowledge, then start measuring progress, and eventually they won't need supervising – you can just agree on a task or project, and simply measure them by their results. Managers have to change their mindset from measuring effort, to measuring results."

Encourage innovation

What are the common problems?

There's the belief that innovation is less forthcoming in a distributed team than an in-office team, says Perera. This may be because there are fewer random opportunities for ideas to be shared and developed. It can also be more difficult to engage remote workers, and it can be harder to broadcast a culture of innovation across a distributed team. Innovation can also end up being on a more local basis, only relevant to where individuals are physically located, and less global in its outlook.

What are the benefits to innovation within a distributed team?

Recent studies by the American Psychological Association comparing the performance of matched groups on in-office and virtual collaboration sessions reveal that distributed teams generate more high quality ideas and have a higher average of creative ideas per person, as well as resulting in higher levels of satisfaction with the ideas. An article on the subject by Harvard Business Review summarises that "As shown in meta-analyses, virtual brainstorming enhances creative performance – versus in-person brainstorming sessions – by almost 50% of a standard deviation. This means that almost 70% of participants can be expected to perform worse in traditional than virtual brainstorming sessions."

Perera advises to start out small, and focus on marginal gains. Ask for distributed team's help with little things, and this will help you to build a virtual culture of innovation. Within a distributed team set-up, there is far more time and space for thinking, which isn't so forthcoming within an office environment.

Prioritise personal development

How do you make sure distributed team members get the appropriate level of professional development? This can be a tricky element for leaders to manage.

What are the common problems?

Within a distributed team it can be difficult to do on the job training, mentoring or work shadowing. It can also be impossible to include virtual workers in group training, unless they attend via webcam. For these reasons, there's the danger that professional development will become a lower priority for remote workers,

than in-office staff. Performance-related conversations can also be awkward to handle virtually, particularly if there are problems that need to be discussed.

How to approach it?

Perera argues that online learning tools are increasingly available, through customised programmes created in-house, or via those available online for free or often very low cost.

Deloitte, for example, has set up Deloitte University; an online programme for developing knowledge as well as soft skills like leadership. Accenture has also built its own online network for online learning and development, as has Ticketmaster where students can experience online simulations of situations that would happen on the job.

Ultimately distributed working suits some individuals better than others; it isn't necessarily for everyone. Some individuals will always perform better within a 9 to 5 office environment. But increasingly, distributed

working needs to be part of the recruitment and onboarding process, argues Perera. Emerging technologies, such as virtual reality software and wearables, could also help to significantly advance distributed working in the future, so it's an exciting space to be a part of if you're not already.

About the author

Wendy McAuliffe is director of social media and content creation consultancy [Populate Digital](#), and co-founder of [Bloggers Required](#). She is also part of the respected [Econsultancy](#) training team. Wendy's a former technology journalist and in her spare time writes a parenting blog, [MummyMcAuliffe](#). She lives by the sea, and that's where she can usually be found on her days off. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#) or follow her on [Twitter](#).

This article is based on the webinar delivered by online expert, author and futurologist, Gihan Perera, which can be viewed [here](#).

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