Lessons learned building messaging software with a fully remote team

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Why did we build a fully remote development team?

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Why

- Mattermost
  - The open source project
  - The company
- Our community is fully remote
  - Why not make the company fully remote
- Our customers are in all time zones
  - Why not make the company in all time zones

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Why Cont.

- Software is not bound by location
  - We don’t dig diamonds out of a mine
- We build communication software
  - What a fantastic way to test it
  - We dogfood our own software with daily builds
  - Pre-Release houses the community, customers, and our core staff
  - Our community and company survive by it

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What are the benefits of a fully remote development team?

Benefits

- A vast sea of resources
  - We recruit from that sea
  - Why limit ourselves
- Passionate people who believe in the mission
  - Meaningful work that's personally important
- Most fundamentally believe the work we're doing matters

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Benefits Cont.

- We can respond in time zones our customers are in
- People feel empowered by our trust in them
  - We count on each other to do high quality work
  - There isn't a boss hovering over your shoulder
  - The process self-selects motivated individuals who are self-sufficient

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Benefits Cont.

- We offer a digital nomad lifestyle most only dream about

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What are the drawbacks of fully remote?

Drawbacks

- Hiring in all time zones
- Knocking on an closed office door isn’t easy, knocking on a virtual office door is even harder
- Potential investors/customers think we’re weird
- Who’s in the office right now?

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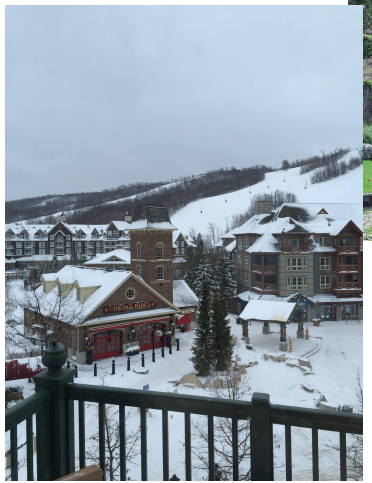
Drawbacks Cont

- Human face-to-face time*



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What does good communication look like?

The Good

- **A organization that values asynchronous written form communication**
- Writing everything down is powerful for the community and employees
  - Everyone is working on a shared problem
  - Anyone who has the answer jumps in
- Must also be good at ephemeral video
  - Still a valuable form of communication
  - We write down the summary in-channel

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The Good Cont.

- We’re anti-meeting
  - We still have them, but we’re mindful about how many we have
  - We try to limit them and constantly ask, “Is this recurring meeting valuable?”
  - We have the attitude that anything that can be done in a meeting can probably be better served asynchronously

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The Good Cont.

- Being respectful of time zones
  - Most important is being mindful (saying “not urgent”)
- Simulate water cooler time
  - We hangout in audio only chat
  - We have off-topic rooms like music, cars, reading
  - We have an optional weekly video game hour

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The Good Cont.

- Topic based conversations
  - Encourage public channels for the benefit of the community
  - Unlocked tribal knowledge for community and employees
  - For every writer there are ten readers
  - Allows community and company to interact on an intimate level

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What does suboptimal communication look like?

The Bad

- Hello? Anyone there? -> Receives message at 3am
- Fear of always needing to be “On”
  - Make sure to end your workday
  - Decompressing is meaningful
  - Sitting at home after dinner, just watching TV, I can respond to that message since I’m not doing anything important

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The Bad

- Short/terse writing can come across as upset/angry
- Conversations can be brought back from the dead or drag on
- Bad etiquette
  - @all in a busy channel
  - Expecting real time responses
  - Not replying to the thread

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What tools do we use to be effective?

Tools We Use

- Mattermost
  - lots of bots and plugins
- Zoom
- Github
- Jira
- Shared Google Calendar

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How do we work with customers?

Customer Communication

- Some customers are given a channel within Mattermost (Pre-Release)
  - Core staff are added to the channel including PMs, Devs, and Support
- Channel is used for feature development
- Customer provide feedback on features
- Customers use the channel for incident response

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What are we trying to improve?

Upgrade Needed

- Better at recording company/team meetings
- Organizing smaller regional meetups and company gatherings
- Holding more office hours
- Understand when people are offline
- We’re constantly asking how to break down the virtual door

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Questions?

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