Lessons learned building messaging software with a fully remote team

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Why did we build a fully remote development team?
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
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
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
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
Benefits Cont.

• We offer a digital nomad lifestyle most only dream about
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?
• Human face-to-face time*
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
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
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
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
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
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
What tools do we use to be effective?
Tools We Use

• Mattermost
  – lots of bots and plugins
• Zoom
• Github
• Jira
• Shared Google Calendar
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
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
Questions?
How to reach me?

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