

Remote Whitepaper

Lessons learned on working here, there, and just about everywhere





Hello!

We're Brains on Fire.

Brains on Fire is a creative company who believes in the power of human connection. We partner with bold brands and organizations that want to grow, so they can do more good in the world. In an industry that often reduces people to transactions and dollar signs, we believe sustainable success is the result of brands and organizations focusing on how they can make positive contributions to the world. We have teams in Greenville, South Carolina; Los Angeles, California; Denver, Colorado; and Columbus, Ohio.

As a team, we help our clients do more than just sell a product, service or cause. We develop strategies that empower brands and organizations to do well by doing good. This happens by connecting people, telling authentic stories, and making a meaningful impact in the world and the lives of others. Over the years, we've helped our clients do some cool things—from breaking the stigma associated with addiction to saving the lives of adoptable horses, from raising awareness about child sex trafficking to creating \$1.1 billion annual impact within a growing southern destination. (And there's a whole lot more that you can read about [here](#).)

Who should read this white paper?

The short answer: anyone who owns, runs or manages a business. Once upon a time, the thought of distributed teams seemed revolutionary, nutty and perhaps even a bit scary. Today, it is reality for a rapidly-growing number of companies in just about every industry. The question is no longer a matter of *if* you should embrace distributed teams and remote workplace options, but rather *when, how, and why*.



Preface

Hey there. I'm Amy Taylor, Brand Storyteller and Stoker of the Fire at Brains on Fire. In addition to these labels, I wear one more nontraditional title: *remote employee*. Throughout this white paper, I'll be taking the lead on stringing the data and words together—that's what I get paid to do, after all. You'll also be hearing from a couple of my colleagues at Brains on Fire and a few special guests. The list includes:

Brandy Amidon, CFO at Brains on Fire

Emily Kosa, Maven of Calm + Operations at Brains on Fire

Robbin Phillips, Courageous President at Brains on Fire

Moe Rice, Social Strategist at Brains on Fire

Jason Blumer, Founder of Blumer CPAs

Greg Hoy, Principal at Happy Cog

Rusty Partch, Social Innovation Strategist at Chipotle Mexican Grill

Jeff Robbins, Cofounder of Lullabot

And now that you know the cast of characters, let's get down to (remote) business.

State of the Office



Remote employees. Telecommuters. Satellite humans. Distributed teams. Whatever you call them, there is plenty of conversation going on about the evolution of the workplace— and the workforce of the future.

In 2009, 34 million Americans reported working from home at least some of the time. Based on the upward trend, ***it was predicted*** that number would reach a staggering 63 million, which is 43% of the total U.S. workforce, by 2016. ***They were right.***

“Gallup has consistently found that flexible scheduling and work-from-home opportunities play a major role in an employee’s decision to take or leave a job. Employees are pushing companies to break down the long-established structures and policies that traditionally have influenced their workdays.”

- Employees and some employers view the practice [of remote employment] as broadly beneficial, saying that remote workers ***are more productive*** and that the additional flexibility ***can help to close*** the gender gap.
- Most industries have embraced remote options—none more rapidly than the finance, insurance and real estate industries. The share of workers in those fields who report working remotely “occasionally” rose to 47% in 2016.
- Workers who spend none or all their time out of the office reported feeling equally engaged as those who spent all their time in an onsite office. Those who spent 60 – 80% of their time away from the office had the highest rates of engagement.
- Workers who spend three or four days a week working remotely were the most likely to report feeling like they had a best friend at work and/or opportunities for professional growth.¹

The data doesn’t lie. We are seeing a swift evolution in focus from work**place** to work**force**. Companies who want to thrive are embracing the changing needs and wants of the modern workforce. In order to compete and succeed, businesses need top talent. Today, recruitment and retention are about a lot more than salary. Job seekers are looking for work-life balance, positive internal culture and priorities. Work is no longer about sharing a zip code or physical office space. Work-life integration is taking precedence, and flexibility is now the ultimate perk employees seek.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/us/remote-workers-work-from-home.html>

Why the sudden change?

A 2014 survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management found a greater increase in the number of companies planning to offer telecommuting than just about any other new benefit. While there are a multitude of factors prompting companies to embrace remote workplace options, a few of the biggest motivators include:

Remote options retain current talent.

When it comes to top talent, there will always be someone dangling a carrot offering more money, more plentiful perks or a better deal. In 2014, ***employees received an average raise of only three percent from their employers.*** Given the cost of inflation, that pans out to approximately one percent in additional spending power. However, if an employee opts to leave their current employer and accept a position with a new company, they can expect an average 20% increase in salary. *That's pretty enticing.*

The numbers vary slightly, but the average cost to replace an employee who quits ranges anywhere from 50 – 150% of their salary. And that figure doesn't consider the hit to established client relationships, internal culture, workflow and brand reputation. (Think people don't notice when your agency/company is a revolving door? ***They do.*** They *really* do.)

ZenWorkplace.com says it well:

“If your company has thousands of dollars that it can just light on fire at the next office BBQ, then maybe you don't really need to invest in employee retention. But my guess is that the vast majority of companies are simply not in that position. It costs less to retain than it does to replace.”

Employee moves happen for a variety of reasons. Even the happiest workers occasionally have a valid reason for relocation—spousal job changes, caring for aging parents, etc.—but with remote options, relocation is no longer synonymous with having to leave a situation working well for both employer and employee.

Remote employment options open doors to alternate arrangements that are good for employees and for business. Employment becomes less about where you are and more about that special something you bring to the business. (Fun Fact: Remote employees ***reported higher levels of happiness and were found to be 50 percent less likely to quit than their peers.***)

Remote options attract prospective talent.

Similarly, remote employment options allow companies to tap into and attract a much wider pool of prospective talent. Chances are the best applicants for a given position don't live in your backyard or even in your zip code. For companies physically based in less populous areas of the country, the struggle is even greater. The smaller the city, the smaller the talent pool, which can prove to be especially challenging when it comes to recruiting, attracting and hiring applicants for highly specialized or creative roles.

When your company considers only local talent, you're hiring for geography, not necessarily for skill set. You would be hard-pressed to find a single case study where being in the same location proved a greater contributor to a company's success than the passion and talent their team brought to the table.

Remote lowers overhead costs.

As part of its BlueWork program, ***American Express*** conducts an employee survey, which helps assign employees to one of four categories: Hub, Club, Roam and Home. "Hub" employees' work requires a fixed desk and their presence in the office every day. "Club" employees have flexible roles that involve in-person and virtual meetings. They can share time between the office and other locations. Those in the "Home" category are based from home offices—set up with assistance from the company—on three or more days per week. "Roam" employees are almost always on the road or at customer sites and seldom work from an ***American Express*** office. The BlueWork program has delivered not only improved worker productivity but also saved between \$10 - \$15 million annually in real estate costs, says the company. ²

A little later we'll introduce you to Greg Hoy, Principal at the Philadelphia-based agency Happy Cog. In the fall of 2016, Greg decided it was time for their agency to go remote. The impetus? They were paying for a 7,200-square-foot office space that was rarely used.

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2013/04/01/flexible-workspaces-another-workplace-perk-or-a-must-have-to-attract-top-talent/>

Worries + Woes



Despite statistics and studies repeatedly finding distributed teams to be happier and more productive, fear continues to be the major hindrance to embracing remote policies for many employers. If you can't see your people or regularly meet in person, how can you be sure they're doing what they're supposed to be doing and maintaining productivity?

We're going to make this simple for you. Meetings don't make people productive. ***And if you can't trust your people to get things done when you're not looking over their shoulder, then you've hired the wrong people.*** Lack of trust is a people problem, not a place problem.

Spoiler alert: Your employees *are* wasting time. Yep. Right at this very moment, right in your office. And it doesn't have anything to do with where they're working. It's about how they're working.

Salary.com ***gathered responses from 750 employees.*** The verdict: wasted time at work in an office is way up.

(Employers, you might want to grab the smelling salts before you proceed with this read. Go ahead. We can wait.)

In 2013, 69% of respondents said they wasted at least some time at work daily (62% of employees surveyed reported wasting between 30 minutes to an hour per day). The number of people who admitted to dillydallying at work had jumped up to a whopping 89% just a year later.

According to Salary.com contributor Aaron Gouveia, four percent of people surveyed waste at least ***half the average workday on non-work-related tasks.***

A ***second survey*** by Harris Poll for CareerBuilder queried 3,022 full-time workers across a variety of industries and company sizes to determine the reasons for the steadily increasing time waste. Not surprisingly, "personal use of technology" was at the front of the pack. Twenty four percent of workers admitted they spend at least an hour a day on personal email, texts and calls. According to the survey, employees are doing the following with their squandered time:

- 50% spent talking and texting on cell phones
- 42% spent gossiping
- 39% spent on the Internet
- 38% spent on social media
- 27% spent taking snack or smoke breaks
- 24% spent distracted by noisy co-workers
- 23% spent in meetings
- 23% spent emailing³

With that minor reality check, we hope you're starting to see things with a fresh perspective.

Up next: We'll look at common misconceptions surrounding remote employment and distributed teams.

³ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/cherylsnappconner/2015/07/31/wasting-time-at-work-the-epidemic-continues/#5bfd94d33ac1>

Misconceptions



Along with fear and uncertainty of the unknown, a handful of misconceptions continues to plague the remote workplace conversation. We recently asked a group of remote workers to share assumptions they've run into while working on a distributed team:

- “When you're not in the office, you're taking the day off.”
- “You either have to work from home or a coffee shop.”
- “It's difficult to keep in touch with coworkers, access files, etc.”
- “You never see your coworkers or talk to them.”
- “You can't possibly be putting in eight hours a day at home.”
- “You're not as committed to the company as the in-office team.”
- “You must be a total introvert or constantly lonely.”
- “You work in a bubble of isolation.”
- “You must get nothing done.”
- “You are lazy, haven't showered in two weeks and only wear pajamas.”

Now, let's take a further look at a few of these misconceptions.

Misconception #1

You can't be productive if you're not working in an office.

At one time or another, all remote employees have heard it:

You must have so much...self-discipline.

I wish I could do laundry during the day...

I wouldn't get anything done if I didn't come into the office...

A little pause can say so much. Frame it up however you like, the implication is clear: ***It's not possible that you can be productive unless you have someone watching over your shoulder at work.***

(This is that delightful part where we get to tell you science completely disagrees.)

A whopping 98% of people already taking advantage of flexible working practices say their location freedom has a “positive impact on productivity.” Though it may seem counterintuitive to everything companies have been groomed to believe, remote employees are almost 14% more productive than their counterparts working in a physical office. (Most companies we know would be *thrilled* to see a 14% increase in their employees’

productivity. Who knew the pixie dust was right under their nose all this time?)⁴

So, what's the deal? Can working in an office really be that bad for productivity? Yes. Yes, it can. And much of the blame falls on the rampant adoption of the open office. Once considered the new gold standard and hallmark of a creative company space, the negative implications of open offices have been at the center of the industrial design and social psychology conversation in recent years.

*“ Open office plans face increasing backlash for their reported negative effects on productivity. Many workers are finding it easier (and quieter) to work from home. Shared work environments, and in particular **hot-desking**, are associated with increases in distraction, negative relationships, uncooperative behaviors and distrust. If you want to make employees work better together, let them work separately, from home. It may sound counter-intuitive, but employees are apt to work more efficiently and collaboratively when operating remotely.⁴ ”*

CASE STUDY

Travel website Ctrip's gave call center employees the opportunity to volunteer to work from home for a period of nine months. Half the volunteers were allowed to telecommute; the rest remained in the office as a control group. When compared with their office-bound counterparts, survey responses and performance data showed that those working from home made 13.5% more calls, quit the company 50% less and reported much higher levels of happiness on the job.

One-third of the productivity increase [at Ctrips] was due to having a quieter environment, which makes it easier to process calls. At home, people don't experience what we call the “cake in the breakroom” effect. Offices are actually incredibly distracting places. The study participants who worked from home also put in more hours and took fewer sick days, thanks to not having to commute, as well as the ability to start earlier in the day.⁵

⁴ <https://nypost.com/2017/03/22/remote-employees-are-way-more-productive-than-office-dwellers/>

⁵ <https://hbr.org/2014/01/to-raise-productivity-let-more-employees-work-from-home>

Misconception #2

Working remote is isolating and lonely.

As someone who enjoys the productivity that accompanies a solo workday, I'm often surprised how many people profess they could never work remotely because they "would be way too lonely." As it turns out, the workforce is split right down the middle on this.

In the same Ctrips case study, 50% of those who worked from home elected to return to the office in some capacity at the end of the nine-month trial. Their reason? Feeling lonely and getting *passed over for promotions*. (Which is, unfortunately, *a real challenge faced by remote employees*.) It should be noted, however, most of the 50% who elected not to work solely from home did end up creating flexible work schedules that allowed for both working time in the office and time working remotely throughout the week.

Creative chaos can be both friend and foe. (Have *you* ever tried proofing with Beyoncé blasting in the background?) At times, frenetic energy and noise can be useful, even inspiring. Most moments when we're faced with the need to focus, however, sidebar conversations, musical mixes and desk-side drop-bys suddenly become distracting, focus-derailing interruptions that can lead to a creative cluster.

The point is, we all have different working styles, needs and preferences. There is no one-size-fits-all. Therein lies the beauty of the cultural shift from where you work (workplace) to *how you work best* (workforce). Co-working spaces are popping up everywhere. From Skype to Slack, there are countless ways to stay in constant contact with your team. Working remotely is not synonymous with being lonely, nor should it be.

**When asked "How happy are you at work?"
remote employees scored 8.10 out of 10.**

Traditional onsite employees scored 7.42.⁶

⁶ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2016/05/02/are-remote-workers-happier-and-more-productive-new-survey-offers-answers/#4957ff33455c>

Misconception #3

It's all or nothing.

There are many ways to adapt the remote philosophy to fit the dynamics of your company and team. A remote workplace policy is about giving your people the individual flexibility to create a work environment that suits them best. What helps one company or industry thrive, may not be sustainable in another. There's no right or wrong way, but there are plenty of options to explore as you search for the one that fits your company best. Blair Reeves hits on a few possibilities in her article, [Remote Working is the Future, and Should Be the Present.](#)

FULLY DECENTRALIZED

Employees are 100% remote, widely distributed and mainly work out of home offices.

- **Advantage:** Because remote is the norm, accommodating it is routine. Everyone uses web meetings, conference calls and collaboration tools by default.
- **Disadvantage:** Building a cohesive company culture and interpersonal relationships takes a long time and very deliberate effort.

HUB-AND-SPOKES

Most employees are based in a centralized headquarters, with a sprinkling of remote employees based elsewhere.

- **Advantage:** The company can offer remote arrangements to high-value recruits they'd otherwise lose. Travel costs are somewhat lower.
- **Disadvantages:** Remote employees must work even harder to be heard and have an impact. This option often results in particularly arduous travel requirements for them. Remote employees can feel left out of the headquarters' company culture.

HYBRID

There are tons of variations on this option, but it can involve many employees being based remotely and traveling for periodic centralized meetings. Employees may either work in home offices or in subsidized co-working spaces.

- **Advantage:** Remote is again routine, and people are used to collaborating that way. Employees feel included in company culture. Big savings in central office cost.
- **Disadvantages:** Having a headquarters can seem unnecessary most of the time, and travel costs could be higher.

So, when considering your company's best option, talk to your people. Ask them what they want. Find out what excites them and what scares them. Take a page from Goldilocks' book and experiment around until you find that something that feels just right.

Misconception #4

I can't trust my employees to get their work done if they're not in the office.

In 2015, we implemented a policy allowing that our employees work Thursdays from wherever they feel most productive. (Thursdays are also meeting-free “Jam Days”, but we’ll talk about that a little later.) A couple of our co-workers still elect to head to the office on Thursdays, but most of our team mixes it up. We’ve had Brains on Fire employees working everywhere from tiny homes to the beach, from the art museum to local coffee shops.

At the onset, we fielded the expected questions and concerns. *How can we be sure people won't change loads of laundry in between tasks? How will we know someone isn't stepping away to take a walk instead of tapping away at a computer? How can we guarantee everybody is on task at every moment of the day?*

The short answer: We can't. And that's fine. Why? Because we hire people we trust. We trust our employees to be good people who do the right and honest thing. We trust them to do what they say they'll do and to pull their weight. We trust them to raise a flag if they are at risk of falling behind. We trust them to be there for their team. We trust that, if we were hit by a bus tomorrow, they'd pick up the torch and keep things going. We trust that the success of our company—and the success of our clients—matters just as much to every person on our team as it does to our greater whole. Our trust in our team supersedes the hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and we don't need to verify any of this by looking over their shoulders. So, yeah. Go ahead and take that afternoon stroll to get some fresh air. Pop in a load of laundry in between conference calls. Give your dog a pat on the head for us. It's all good.

If you can't trust your people to do what they should be doing without you standing over their shoulder, you've hired the wrong people. That's not a process problem or a place problem, it's a people problem.

Misconception #5

Working remote is a fad.

Improvements in communication technology, rising cost of living and a desire to attract and retain top talent have all played a part in the rapid adoption of remote employment options. Like it, love it or hate it, remote is happening – and it’s happening now. You have two choices: resist or embrace. But in the wise words of the Borg, “Resistance is futile”. Instead, we encourage you to opt for embrace. We promise the transition will not be as difficult (or scary) as it seems. Baby steps.

Up next, we’ll look at what we did – and how our struggles and discoveries can help you frame up your own remote game plan.

What We Did



AMY TAYLOR

Chief Wordologist + Stoker of the Fire

Brains on Fire was founded in 1999. Over the years, we've upsized and downsized and just-right-sized. We've changed office spaces several times. People have come and gone, and more than a few boomeranged back again. (I should know. I'm one of them.)

In 2014, I had been working for Brains on Fire for a few years. I loved my job, loved my colleagues, loved coming to work each day. I'd spend Monday through Friday in the office with the crew, then meet them for wine on the weekends. I was loving life, but with hundreds of miles between me and home, I really started to miss my family.

Shortly after I left Brains on Fire to move back home, I received an email from Robbin. I'll summarize, but as I recall, it went something like: "This is dumb. You love us. We love you. Let's figure out how to make this work."

And with that, I became the first remote employee at Brains on Fire. We felt our way through the early days in search of a new normal across the many-mile divide. As it turned out, we easily found our groove.

For the most part, it's business as usual. On my end, the biggest change has been making a concerted effort to constantly communicate. It forces me to be bold about things like asking to be added to a meeting when someone forgets to invite me. Also, since I miss out on the impromptu coffee walks and spontaneous mid-afternoon powwows by not being physically present in the office with the rest of the team, I try to compensate by keeping in constant contact with everyone via Slack and text. (It works. From 500 miles away, I know more about the details of Moe's day-to-day life than I do most of my friends who live five minutes up the road.)

On the team's end, our arrangement has required a new level of trust. Trust that I will stay on task. Trust that I will pull my weight. Trust that I will stay just as invested and engaged in our work as I would if I were in the office. The ease with which we have transitioned into and embraced this new way of working together is a testament to my colleagues and our company culture.

I'll be honest here. The addition of even one remote employee means a shift in the way everyone works to some degree. It requires an agreement from all that this is a worthy endeavor, and we're all on board. There are occasional technology snafus, and I always need a volunteer to carry my disembodied head into meetings on a laptop screen, but that's about as difficult as it gets. Even though my "morning commute" is only 10 feet from the bedroom to my home office, nobody has ever played the "it's not fair" card. I've never been made to

feel like anything less than a full and valued member of our team, even from new folks who have never worked with me in person. Everyone has adapted, and over time it truly has become our new normal.

As fate would have it, a couple years after I became our first “remotee”, Brains on Fire LA came on the scene. Having a little practice working as a distributed team made it an easy merge for all. Time zones be damned! Today we’re just one big, happy extended “BOFamily” with teammates in South Carolina, Los Angeles, Colorado and Ohio.

Perspective from our President



ROBBIN PHILLIPS

Courageous President of Brains on Fire

Google “working remotely” and you’ll find tons of information and advice. I’m not going to attempt to repeat it. What I want to do with my time at the podium is speak to the emotional side of letting your employees work remotely.

As a business owner, embracing remote working is a heartfelt, emotional decision.

For years, we ran a successful business in Greenville, South Carolina, but one thing always seemed to stunt our growth—a false belief that to be a part of our tribe, employees needed to live and work in our town and show up in our physical office. (Which, frankly, wasn’t always easy.) Exceptionally crazy, shiny talent, like storytellers and designers and community managers, is not an easy find in our industry. At Brains on Fire, we look for something in our hires we have a hard time putting into words. We sure do know it when we see it, though.

For years, we felt we had to stick an old-school rule of employees being based in our town and office. It seems silly in retrospect. I can’t count the number of opportunities we had to hire remarkable talent and turned them down simply because they weren’t able or willing to relocate.

Our journey to embracing remote work options started in 2013 with our copywriter, Amy. We loved Amy. And she loved us, but she wanted to be back near her family. So, she went looking for a new job. Being wildly talented, she found it in her hometown, and we were sick to our stomachs about this farewell. We missed her *dearly*. After three years of living in Greenville, she was one of us to the core. So once three months had passed without her, enough was enough. Together we managed to figure out how to make this whole remote thing happen, and Amy led the way. It’s not always *ideal*, but it sure as heck beats being without the talent we need and love.

After that, Brandy Amidon, our CFO, had one of the sweetest little babies on the planet. Losing her to a desire to spend more time with her child was simply not an option. So again, even though Brandy only lives twenty minutes away, we found a way to make it work through a combination of in-office and remote options. Frankly, I love it. I love being able to call Brandy and hear her calm voice of reason in the middle of the day. We both work hard to find one-on-one time together when she is in the office, and Brandy does a great job of always being on-call when she’s not. It requires more effort from both sides, but again, it’s worth it.

In 2015, we opened an office in Los Angeles. This expansion was a huge, wonderful step for Brains on Fire. I learned that by having clear, set times to connect with Benjamin Hart, the Principal and leader of our LA office, we not only can learn from each other remotely, but we can also form the close bonds of trust that lead to remarkable work and innovation. Furthermore, we always attempt to mingle our teams when we travel to client sites and locations. Also, technology like Slack makes it easy and fun to stay connected and share visuals with each other as we work. Josh, a designer who began in our LA office, moved to Colorado not long after the merge. His transition has also been smooth and seamless.

This puts all 25 of our employees in four states within a four-year period. The evolution has opened our eyes and hearts to what is possible.

In the end, what really won me over was one simple action. I started giving *myself* permission to work remotely. And while I truly prefer the company of our team, I also get a ton of work done when I am completely alone at home. Yes, I might do a load of laundry or sweep the back deck, but the break from my work routine gives me time to think, dream, read and connect in a thoughtful way with our clients and advocates.

As you will read elsewhere in this white paper, Thursday at Brains on Fire is now “Jam Day”. Not everyone elects to work remote on Thursdays, and not everyone always can. But we trust in our team to make those decisions.

We are big believers that happy people are more productive and more creative people. When you have a job that honors your needs, you protect it like a beloved child.

Here’s one last bit of truth and learning gleaned from this remote working journey: the more you trust your team, the more they begin to trust themselves. And *that* is always a great thing.

Perspective from our CFO



BRANDY AMIDON
CFO at Brains on Fire

So, you're curious about how working remotely works here at Brains on Fire, and how it could benefit your bottom line? I must tell you, we have no hard dollar statistics or percentages to prove to you that working remotely is good for your P&L.

We eliminated time sheets back in 2009, and now bill our clients based on value, not time. We only hire people we love and trust. We don't track their time in 15-minute increments. We don't have different hourly rates. We don't micromanage each other. We treat employees like trusted professional partners and teammates, because that's exactly what they are.

Our open office environment creates a space where constant chatter happens throughout the day. It can be difficult to focus on a task or thought with so much going on around you, even when you are jamming out to music in your headphones. For me, it's my month-end reporting that requires my undivided attention. However, it can be challenging to focus on numbers in a room full of 20-something incredibly talented—and hilarious—people I'd rather spend time with. Sometimes, we simply need quiet to get things done.

Brains on Fire started Jam Day for that very reason. We needed a dedicated time without meetings and interruptions. And the idea for working remotely on Jam Days grew out of suggestions from the team. The main idea? As an employee, if you stick to our core values and do what you said you would when you said you'd do it, who cares whether you are in the office or not?

So, what's the ROI? No idea from a dollar standpoint. But, I can tell you that employees love the option of working remotely on Thursdays. Some come into the office, some don't. Some stay in their pajamas and wash laundry in between calls at home. No one has mentioned anyone who hasn't been accessible via Slack, phone or email on Thursdays. Many of us hold onto projects for Thursdays, knowing we'll have quiet time. Our team feels refreshed and accomplished at the end of the day. Until Jam Day, our company had never had internal survey results come back with everyone in total agreement. There is lots of love for our remote work option.

We also have a few full-time remotees. Our remote workers are not random people we hired from ten states away; they are a dedicated part of our Brains on Fire family. What Amy and Josh choose to wear or work on at 10 a.m. their time is their prerogative. We know they're on top of things, so if they work best at midnight, 5 a.m., or right after a midday nap, I have no idea. That's where the trust factor comes into play.

You hire the best you can afford and give them all the tools for a trusting, professional relationship. This is an immeasurable ROI that will hopefully lead to increased productivity, brain breaks for awesome ideas, and employee retention for the long haul. Statistics to back you up aren't even necessary. Present the idea to your team, agree to test it out for a few months, and see how everyone feels after giving it a try via surveys. If you've done your job by hiring the best and the brightest, they'll love and trust the freedom—and your company will be better for it.

Perspective from Others



QA WITH JASON BLUMER
Founder of Blumer CPAs

Written by Brandy Amidon

Picture it. A room full of CPAs at a continuing education class. Tight rows of seats and lots of discussions about federal tax updates. In a sea of gray, there stands out a young guy (well...he was back then) with spiked blonde hair and thick-rimmed black glasses. I knew exactly who he was. A weirdo accountant on social media at a time we were still defining “social media” and whether it had any purpose in our accounting world. I stalked him a little from afar and during a break, I asked for his autograph. He asked if I was interested in a job. We’ve been friends and fellow weirdo CPA colleagues ever since. When I try something new at Brains on Fire with a client that’s different from all the rest, like abolishing time sheets, he’s the first one I want to talk to. While he’s super smart and brave to go against the grain in such a traditional profession, he’s also hilarious. Here’s a bit on my conversation with Jason about his experience with running a remote company.

When did you adopt remote options?

We officially closed our doors on July 1, 2012. Our clients had been prepared for the transition a full year prior to help them make the move with us to a virtual firm. Some clients chose not to migrate with us, which we fully expected. Those clients we sold to a local firm that still had a physical office.

What inspired you to do so?

We began getting clients in other parts of the country around 2008 or 2009. We serve creative development, design, and marketing agencies across the US, so they were comfortable with us being remote. As this niche grew in our firm, we thought it would be an interesting experiment to see if we could become one of the first fully virtual firms to serve creative clients all over the country.

How has it impacted your business? Your internal culture?

The change has made us more focused. We became somewhat “invisible” as I like to say, so we had to really focus on our marketing. Virtual firms must make their marketing processes effective so that their market continues to see them.

Our internal culture has been one of the hardest and most surprising parts of becoming a virtual firm. We began this journey believing all employees would love this model and thrive. Turns out, that’s not the case. Many team members will say that they love a virtual firm, but then struggle to be responsive, focus on their

work or stay involved in team culture. We have had to learn a new way to hire so our newest team members are fully aware of what it takes to work in a virtual environment. My partner has begun focusing more on team culture, and we've found we need to connect our team at least once a year to keep them interested in each other and feeling like part of the family.

I will say that managing a virtual team culture is harder than we expected, and a virtual company really must focus on making sure the culture attracts and sustains good team members.

What challenges or obstacles arose?

We made some assumptions that the processes we followed in a brick and mortar location were the same as a virtual company. This was not true! We had to be very thoughtful about each process, knowing that every single step had to be documented in a linear fashion so that no part of our service was overlooked.

For example, when a client used to pick up their completed tax return in our office, we were (1) getting them to sign forms, (2) getting paid for the return, and (3) explaining the final tax return to them. We didn't realize how linear these steps were and because of that, we started to miss some forms and confused a few clients with our new combined processes. We had to readdress each process, figure out which comes first and perform them in a way that didn't confuse the client.

What do you wish you had known before you started?

I wish someone had asked me *why* we were going virtual. Just knowing the purpose of such a disruptive change to our business model would have saved us some of the missteps. I'm glad we did it, but I believe I had some wrong motivations to becoming virtual and wish someone had challenged me on why I was doing it.

What is the best piece of advice you have for other business leaders considering adopting remote options as part of their practice?

Virtual companies are certainly not for everyone. I know that now. It's not the coolest, latest fad that everyone should try. Just like working in an office, virtual companies have their issues too that must be addressed and overcome.

I would say it *will* be hard to be part-remote. Some creative offices allow team members to work remotely, while others are in an office. I believe a best strategy is to hire locally or move to a fully virtual workforce. If you go between, you could possibly confuse your team as to which culture you are building. There is a virtual culture and there is a culture that naturally develops in an office. These will always be different, and it could leave team members feeling left out or unattached.



AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSTY PARTCH

Social Innovation Strategist at Chipotle



Written by Amy Taylor

I encountered my first Chipotle burrito sometime around the year 2004. The brand was still a few years away from hitting the tipping point of explosive growth that would soon follow, and at the time, my closest burrito was a 2.5-hour drive away. (Totally worth it.) As I cradled the not-so-little, guac-filled two-pounder in my hands for the first time that fateful day in Cleveland, I had no idea what the future had in store for Chipotle. I just knew it was love at first bite.

Flash forward a decade. Today, Chipotle is a cherished brand with a loyal (if not rabid) following of fans in cities across America. To offer some perspective, a local suburb has a Chipotle stationed at both the north and south ends of town, just three miles from door to door. Swing by any time during the lunch rush and you're guaranteed to find a line out the door at both locations. When it comes to Chipotle, our love, it seems, knows no bounds. And we'll always find room in our wallets for that scoop of guac. (Yes, even though it costs extra.)

As tasty as their food is, burritos aren't the only thing Chipotle is known for. They've also managed to establish themselves as trendsetters, thought leaders and game changers in the marketing and social spheres. The core of their strategy seems simple: they give a damn about the people who give a damn about their brand. They've built a social team across different time zones and markets. No tweet goes unanswered. No problem is left unresolved. No high five remains...un-fived. And like most things Chipotle does, in matters of building a distributed team, they were years ahead of the curve.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Rusty Partch, Chipotle's Social Innovation Strategist, to chat about how they make it work.

On the Early Days

Chipotle has two offices in the United States—one in Denver, one in New York. New York manages our creative and marketing, Denver handles everything else. We also have marketing strategists scattered across the country. They help the local markets dive in and figure out what ticks in their area. For example, what happens in Ohio may be totally different from what works in Florida or Denver.

Years ago, when social was just starting to come to fruition, we proposed the idea of starting a Facebook page for Chipotle. The CMO thought it was a great idea and told us to go make it happen. Joe Stupp, our Social Media Manager, started pulling together a social team to help him out. We spent about 75% of our time as marketing strategists and 25% doing social. Over time, that evolved and Myra and myself went full-time.

Our new full-time positions immediately posed a challenge. Joe was in Denver, but he didn't think it was fair to ask Myra or me to pick up our lives and move across the country. Myra has family in Ohio. I love the ocean here [in Florida] and there's just not a lot of ocean in Denver. So, from the start, going remote made sense for us. We found it worked well. Back then, on top of marketing, the three of us were also doing engagement.

I would start out with the morning shift and pass to Myra, who covered the middle of the day. Joe was in Denver on Mountain Standard Time, so he would take the latter part of the day. Eventually, we started slowly adding to the team. We brought on a guy in the UK to establish a presence there, but it has also been great because he can help on late nights and early mornings thanks to the time difference. At that point, we had engagement going 22 hours a day, seven days a week.

On Making it Work

Don't get me wrong. A fully remote team is not without its challenges. When it was just Joe, Myra and myself we had a learning curve and some initial disconnect. There were a handful of "Oh crap, I thought you knew about that" moments. There's something to be said about all the little things you get through osmosis by being physically present in the same office with your colleagues.

Since we don't have that luxury, we hold video conferences each week with our entire team. There's a rough agenda that we typically get through in fifteen minutes. Joe gives each of us a roundtable to talk about what we're doing and have going on. After that, it's a lot of the casual conversation you really need to build a strong culture and a team. We talk about how Myra's kid had his first soccer practice. We chat about the trip to Iceland Shane and his wife just went on. We make time for BS. It turns out that stuff is important.

There are also a host of tools that make things a little easier. Recently Myra wanted to watch a companywide presentation, so we used Periscope to video her in. If Joe is in a meeting in Denver, he can hit up the entire team on Slack. If Shane sees something pop up in our social channels, he can instantly share with the rest of us.

We recently had a celebrity engage with the brand. Having that open line of communication meant we were instantly able to have our copywriter in New York working on copy, get it approved, and send a response back out to the celebrity.

On the Ups and Downs

There are benefits that come with being able to really check out and focus. If I need to get something done, I can turn off Slack, and it's amazing what gets accomplished. I can get done in three hours at home what it would have taken a whole day to do in the office.

On the flipside, early on I struggled to really turn off. I have a dedicated office in my home and keep pretty regular office hours. When I'm done with work, I step out of that room, and I'm done for the day. I don't go back in there. That mentality has really helped me out. I make a point to never work on my couch. If I go for an afternoon swim during lunch, I'll sometimes bring my laptop and take a meeting at the pool. But in general, I find if I deviate for too long, my mind starts to wander, and I've got to get back to my office.

The only *real* downfall of a remote team is that I can't go hang out with James to talk about soccer after work or go skiing with Candace in Denver. There's something I miss about that face-to-face time, but we're still a very close group. Part of that is just Chipotle breeding that kind of culture. It would make things a lot more difficult if we were working for a company without that ethos.

On Finding the One

There are always going to be a lot of qualified, smart people out there. They'll have great resumes and impressive experience. For me, it comes down to this: do I see myself going to have a beer with this person on a patio somewhere?

If even one person on our team disagrees with the choice of applicant, that's it. One veto is enough because that person was going to work with all of us. Hiring the right person for a distributed team is about talent, but it's even more about finding the right person. They have to fit in. At Chipotle, we have **13 characteristics** we look for. We can teach people how to use Facebook and Twitter. We can't teach them how to be smart or respectful or happy. You either are or you aren't.



AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFF ROBBINS

Co-Founder and CEO of Lullabot



Written by Amy Taylor

It's 11 a.m. on a Tuesday morning. I'm struggling to kick off a conference call with Lullabot founder Jeff Robbins to discuss the pros and cons of remote teams. We're on our third attempt before we discover the culprit—a Bluetooth speaker determined to hijack our connection. We both laugh. (Technology snafus will be filed under the “con” column.)

We're only a few sentences into our conversation before I realize Jeff is the kind of guy you meet and quickly forget you haven't known your whole life. Energetic and dynamic, he comes at the conversation with a mix of thoughtful pragmatism and effervescent enthusiasm. It's the kind of attitude that differentiates “guy running a business” from “guy doing what he loves”.

Jeff, as it turns out, is an interesting guy who has had a few equally interesting past lives. He worked at **O'Reilly** as an illustrator and systems administrator as the World Wide Web came into being. He was involved in the early stages of the first commercial website, O'Reilly's Global Network Navigator, but left to start one of the first web development companies, Liquid Media, in 1993. In 1994, Jeff's band **Orbit** signed to A&M Records. Over the next six years, the band recorded three albums for A&M, scored a modern rock top 10 hit, appeared on MTV, and toured extensively throughout the U.S. and Canada playing many radio festivals and the Lollapalooza tour.

(This part of Jeff's story causes me a moment of internal panic. I silently pray he doesn't ask me anything about the music scene from that era. My only musical memory of 1994 is rewinding my Walkman approximately 500x while memorizing all the lyrics to Us3's “Cantaloop” on a family road trip to DC.) Jeff is co-founder of Lullabot, a strategy, design and development agency specializing in high-performance projects. Today, their fully remote team is made up of talent distributed around the world. Here's what Jeff had to say when I sat down to talk to him about running a remote team.

On Beginnings

I met my business partner, Matt, in Ames, Iowa. I was living on the East Coast at the time, so we decided to both stay put, start a company and see what happened. As soon as we put our name out there, people in the Drupal community came to us wanting a job and opportunities started coming along. This forced us to figure out what we needed to do legally to make things happen.

The first year was a lot of figuring things out and setting up. We didn't set out to start a business; the business was a side effect. We started the company because Matt and I had both been doing freelance work, and the clients were horrible. They didn't know what success looked like, so there was no way to measure whether we were doing a good job. We finally said screw it, doubled our prices and only worked with clients who had a clear view of success. By charging twice as much and working half as much, we had figured how to architect

the kind of company we wanted to be.

In the years since, we have grown our team to 65 people. And even early on, we recognized that there was so much opportunity that came from allowing people to work from wherever.

On the Office

We had an office for a few years. We thought it would give everyone peace of mind and help with sales, so we found a cool warehouse space and set up shop. My partner and I both diligently went in for a month, but eventually Matt got sick and was home for a week. At the end of that week, he called and commented on how much more productive he had been working from home. Then I caught the illness and reached the same conclusion. I had every intention of coming into the office at least one day a week, but eventually that became once a month. We justified the expense of a physical office with team meet-ups, but eventually people started to feel alienated. There was a sense of disconnect amongst the distributed team members who didn't live in the area and couldn't easily make it to the physical space. They didn't feel as much a part of the team as their colleagues who could be present. So, getting rid of the office helped level the playing field for everyone.

On Pleasant Surprises

One of the most surprising things about going fully distributed was what a close-knit team we were able to build, and what a wonderful culture of collaboration, sharing and general delight has been fostered. Often, when people talk distributed teams, there is a focus on trade-offs. We won't get to see each other, *we won't talk to each other, we're all working asynchronously*. People worry about feeling isolated and lonely. We never thought in those terms, because those trade-offs don't need to exist. You can and should expect better from a remote situation and distributed work environment.

With a distributed team, you can find and hire better people. Not just more talented people, but people who meet other idealistic needs, as well. People who have similar interests in culture and company values and are good communicators. You can hire for diversity. It opens doors to aspirational stuff like hiring those with peripheral disciplines. You're no longer limited at all by the local talent market.

What are your greatest challenges?

A lot of companies struggle to do culture and give people a sense of importance when they're not physically present in an office. I think it comes down to evolution. This is a matter of primal communication compared to more cerebral, intentional communication.

When we're physically present in the same space, we rely heavily on nonverbal. When something good happens, we high five. I'm appreciating you without having to say anything. You can't necessarily high five when your team is distributed, but I don't see this as a bad thing. It forces all of us to be more intentional and deliberate in our communication. It requires us to think about what to say, where to say it and how we want to say it. Sending an email to someone directly isn't always the answer because it's not public enough. Even in a cubicle farm, there is a value in that high five. Everybody hears it and knows that John got recognized. Creating a recognition and gratitude loop is harder when people are not in the office together, but I think it also challenges us to do it all in a better, more meaningful way.

There's a bit of an "Emperor's New Clothes" situation going on around this topic. Everybody wants it, but businesses don't know how to do it. Many companies end up hedging a bit, only allowing their employees to work from home one day a month or quarter, but that's just not enough.

On Opening Up the Lines of Communication

People need to know where they stand when they're spending the bulk of their days sitting behind a computer in a guest room they've converted to an office and their spouse is giving them crap about having it so easy.

It's critical to let people know what their job is. Lots of companies don't have job titles, but you can't do that at distributed teams. People feel like they don't know what their job is without that direction. You must provide clear job guidelines and a title, then share those with the team so everyone knows the hierarchy.

I'm a believer in company hierarchy, but I also believe communication should be flat. Go ahead and use Slack to communicate among all levels and even bitch privately when needed. Management should never discourage that. It's important to have open lines of communication when people are feeling frustrated or think something isn't working right.

We do monthly Town Halls and address questions from anyone who wants to contribute. Rest assured, during that first Town Hall I was scared out of my pants. We're a company full of developers who love learning and puzzle solving. They get bored when they're doing the same thing over and over. This kind of constructive criticism and feedback is a necessary form of vulnerability. We can all be honest and talk about challenges and fears without creating conflict, and that's so important.

On Hiring

Regardless of whether you're hiring for a distributed position or in-office position, you never fully know if someone is going to succeed in the role for which you hire them. Hiring on a probationary condition is a great way to give them a chance and find out if the relationship works for both sides.

In our early days, we primarily hired people we knew, which meant they were already vetted to some degree. When we put up a job application now, we get hundreds and hundreds of applications. Of those resumes, maybe fifty to a hundred are qualified. I find that video interviews add a layer of nervousness and potential for technological disaster, so we start with a phone interview. The first call is more of a touch base to make sure everyone is on the same page. In addition to making sure they understand we have no physical office, we touch on things like their availability for travel and their home technology and internet access. We're looking for good communication skills and computer literacy.

A video call with the hiring manager is the second phase of the interview process. At this point, we're looking to see if they'll make a good cultural match. In a lot of ways, I rely on the same policy I did for the band. Sometimes you find someone with the right skills, but for whatever reason it just doesn't click. Other times it does.

Cultural match is important, but culture also contains the word “cult”. You don’t want to create a homogenous cult where people feel like they can’t come in because they don’t play foosball. Smart hiring is imagining the company you want to be, and then hiring people to create that diverse environment. Part of what people bring to your business is what they add to the holistic picture of the company.

The dangerous pattern I often see occurs a handful of years into the company’s life cycle. Business leaders begin to think, “We’ve shown success, but it hasn’t all lined up. People respect me when I talk at a cocktail party, but I’m still not driving the nicest car. I think it’s time to get serious about this.” Then they run out and hire an asshole, usually a sales guy, who is at odds with the existing company culture. Meanwhile, all the employees look around and wonder if this is what their company leaders meant when they talked about transformation. That’s also the moment people begin looking to see what other jobs are out there. And this is an important lesson when it comes to hiring. It may transform your business. It may make you more profitable. But will it take you one step closer to becoming the company you really want to be?

On Making Things Work (a little better)

One of the hardest and easiest things to establish standing in the same room is trust and rapport. When I see you wearing a band’s t-shirt, I instantly know who you are. That kind of connection is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate, even with video conferencing. Body language and nonverbal cues have a place in the learning centers of our brain. Being together in person does play an important role.

We start client engagements by going into their offices and meeting with them in person. This experience helps with everything from experiencing the political dynamics at-play to understanding that person with a dry sense of humor over the phone. Being able to see the corners of their mouth turn up in person can be the difference between thinking someone is a huge jerk versus a comedic genius.

We also make time for retreats. In addition to a week long, all-company retreat once a year, each department coordinates an annual retreat of their own. Some people need this together time to feel like we’re on track. In a traditional on-site company, so many employees dread the thought of forced together time. They see their colleagues every day, and the last thing they want to do is spend even more time with them. For a distributed team, it’s just the opposite. Absence really does make the heart grow fonder, and people want to hang out with those they respect.

On His Upcoming Book

When we embarked on this distributed team journey, I was looking for a guide to this that didn’t exist. What ended up happening is that I got a bunch of people in a room together to talk about best practices. The result was *Yonder*, a round-table conference for leaders of distributed companies and remote teams. The event brings together companies like Automattic, GitHub, Upworthy, and others to share ideas, discuss best practices and start to develop a common vocabulary around this new frontier for work. Though the work varies, there are a lot of similarities. These brands and business leaders are all experimenters and idealists.



AN INTERVIEW WITH GREG HOY

Principal at Happy Cog



Written by Amy Taylor

It's just after noon on an unseasonably warm Thursday in September. Instead of the usual grey skies and chilled autumn temps, the sun is shining, birds are chirping and temps are soaring into the seventies. As a remote employee, this can only mean one thing: time to ditch the home office in favor of the home patio. After lunch, I slather on a layer of sunscreen that would make my dermatologist proud and head outside feeling an extra deep sense of gratitude for the invention of MacBooks and strong Wi-Fi signals. My afternoon plan is to make progress on our remote white paper, but not before I do a quick scan of my Facebook feed.

(On this day, it seems the serendipity of the social media gods intend to smile down upon me.)

As soon as I open Facebook, there it is in black and white: “***R.I.P. Office***”, an article written by Greg Hoy, owner of Happy Cog. I've “known” Greg for a few years at this point, in the sort of way one knows a person they've chatted with briefly on Twitter and thinks it would be cool to grab a drink with should there ever be an alignment in our geography and the stars.

In short, the article documents Greg's monumental decision to ditch Happy Cog's 7,200-square-foot physical office in favor of going almost entirely remote. Before I've reached the end of the piece, I'm DMing him for an interview. (I'll later come to learn I wasn't the only one. Apparently, the article sparked quite a bit of interest.)

On the morning of our call, I'm reminded of my former life as a child of the '80s, immersed in the tedium of the Dewey Decimal System. (I just realized some of you reading this may not know what that is. Look it up.) At the risk of sounding like an old person, in my day if you wanted to learn about something, you went to the library and rifled through a file cabinet of numbered index cards. Roughly forty minutes later, you'd find yourself thumbing through a National Geographic from 1994 in search of a snippet on the majesty of timber wolves. But I digress.

My point is this: A couple decades ago, accessing information was a process and about the closest you could come to the source was an encyclopedia. Today, you're usually just a tweet and calendar request away from a one-on-one with an expert.

And that's how I found myself on a phone call with Greg Hoy.

On Happy Cog History

Happy Cog was founded in 1999 by my then business partner. He was operating out of New York, and I started working with him in 2006 when I opened an office in Philadelphia. What began as a group of seven or eight freelancers, grew into a team of 34 people by 2013. As we all know, the ebbs and flows of this industry are a rollercoaster. Today, we're a team of twelve, distributed amongst Philadelphia, New York City, Baltimore and

Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Since establishing an office in Philly, we've changed spaces four times. The moves were a necessity to accommodate our growth, with our most recent space coming in at 7,200 square feet and designed to hold roughly 37 people. For a team of twelve, that was a ridiculous amount of space, and I eventually came to an important realization. I was commuting twenty minutes each way to the office. I'd arrive to find three or four people working in this massive space. By the time I got there everybody would be heads down, headphones in and working in silence. If I said hello, nobody would even hear me.

On the Present (and being present)

My framing of work life was formed in a pre-internet era when everyone went into an office from nine to five. One office I worked in even had a bell that would ring when it was time to take a coffee break. Having that kind of structure as my framework made me reluctant to embrace different ways of working. I had it set in my head that collaboration had to happen in the context of people working together in a shared physical space. As tech improved, my mindset started to shift along with it.

There are times when being physically present in a room together is the only way, but that has become the exception rather than the rule. Even when I was in the office with people, most of the communication was happening on Slack, even though we were two desks away from each other. The rest of our team was working from home or from other cities, and that was the moment I realized the way it had always been done just wasn't working anymore. It didn't make sense to pay rent on a 7,200-square-foot space just to hang out together in silence a couple times a week.

On the Solution

I have two little kids, so if they're home when I am working, there's no work getting done. I'm someone who needs to be somewhere to be productive, and I'm most productive in an environment where I'm not distracted.

When we scaled down our staff, I was going down the path of getting another office space. I started thinking about all the bullshit associated with it—brokers, architects, agents—and I didn't want to do that anymore.

I finally got to a point where I didn't feel like I needed to be in the same room to make sure people were working. Our employees wanted more flexibility. They wanted the freedom to work when and where and how they wanted. They know what's on their plates and don't want to let their colleagues down. If they can get eight hours worth of work done in six, that's great. It doesn't matter to me where they're doing their work, as long as they're productive.

Prior to getting rid of our office space, I asked the team to map out their work week. I wanted to know what days they wanted to be on site, if at all. Interestingly, everybody picked Tuesday to be in-office together. Except for those who don't live in Philly, Tuesdays are now the day we get together as a team to work from a co-working space. The rest of our distributed team are within a 10-hour train ride, so we plan to have them join us one Tuesday a month.

In terms of space, **WeWork** turned out to be the ideal solution for our needs. Free Wi-Fi, free coffee and free beer. For those of us who like to be around people, we can. They may not be doing what we're doing, but that makes it even more interesting. On any given day, we could be working alongside PR people, accountants or SEO experts.

On Making the Move

I recently had the opportunity to become the sole owner of Happy Cog. This is my first time without a business partner in twenty years. I feel like I'm finally driving my own car instead of just renting one. With that, I'm popping the hood and poking around. From services and offerings to ideal projects and key client relationships, I'm fine tuning the organization to support a vision. At the same time, I'm looking at every aspect of our balance sheet. I'm looking for the places I can streamline operations. Apart from supporting the cultural dynamics of the work environment, the sheer expense of a space nobody was using was ridiculous. Realizing this waste helped me get on board and make the decision to ditch our dedicated office space.

Even though we still have a group working physically in the same space once a week, we've all had to learn to work distributed. As soon as you have one employee working remotely, you all have to change your work style. You must over-communicate. You can't assume people know what's going on. The good news is that there is plenty of reading and thinking out there about what works and what doesn't.

On Hiring

When it comes to distributed teams, the biggest impact to hiring—and it's a game changer—is we're no longer relegated to finding people within a certain geographic radius. Historically, we wanted people to work in Philly with us, which meant looking for talent here or finding someone and paying to relocate them. (God forbid you move someone and they upend their lives only to realize it's not a good fit after six months—it happens!) With Comcast in Philadelphia, they're eager to gobble up top talent. Demand far exceeds the supply. Opening up our recruiting on a global scale has changed everything when it comes to the kind of team we can build.

On the flipside, distributed teams raise important questions. For example, cost of living should be taken into consideration. If I hire a developer in San Francisco what does their pay look like compared to a developer I've hired in Des Moines, Iowa? Is it the same? Do we adjust?

Above all, when hiring for a distributed team, it's important you get to know your people the best you can. If you don't trust your employees, it's your own fault. You need to be comfortable with their work ethic and ability to maintain focus. You have to work harder to sniff that stuff out when you're not going to be working face-to-face every day. Usually, we hire people who are referrals from someone we know. In addition to doing our due diligence, we believe that when the people we trust vouch for someone, it's going to be a good fit.

Jam Day



In the beginning at Brains on Fire, our remote options were something extended solely to employees living beyond our local hubs of Greenville and Los Angeles. Over time, we’ve seen—and embraced—the aforementioned benefits of remote days and have extended those options to everyone on our team at least a couple days a week. Thursdays now serve as Brains on Fire “Jam Days”.

What the heck is Jam Day?

If you’re thinking about embracing remote workplace options for your business, our best advice is, as you’ve heard several times throughout this white paper, GO DABBLE. Experiment. Try it out. See what happens. We’re not just talking one afternoon. Commit to a week or a month or six months of working fully remote. Work from home, work from a coffee shop, work from a co-working space, work from a beach. Fully immerse yourself in the experience and options that flexibility offers. Talk to your people...then talk to them some more. They’ll have strong opinions on this. Ask the right questions, then get out of their way.

Over the course of some internal discussions, Brains on Fire discovered that our team was feeling bogged down by meetings and hungry for a “protected” day or two a week to get out of the office, get a change of scenery and work uninterrupted.

Meet Jam Day

The average worker is interrupted in some form or another every three minutes in the workplace, and it takes *an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to regain focus* on a task after an interruption. The deck of disruption is stacked against us. When you remove the distraction of impromptu meetings and random desk-side drop-ins, workers suddenly find themselves with a lot more get-it-done time on their hands.

We’ll be the first to admit that meetings are necessary and important. But no matter how necessary and important, they also interrupt the flow of creativity and productivity. That holds true for designers, writers, AEs and just about everyone whose list of job duties includes anything beyond “attend meeting”.

Jam Day is our answer to meeting mania. The premise is simple: it’s one, glorious, recurring, meeting-free day each week for our team to put our head down, focus on producing and get our jam on. We’ve designated Thursdays as Jam Days, which means everyone on the team can count on having eight hours of uninterrupted working time each week. As mentioned, nobody has to work from home. Our office doors are always open, but we encourage the team to spend Jam Days working from wherever they feel most productive.

Lots of friends in the creative industry have expressed interest in establishing their own Jam Day, so we put together a couple of our top takeaways for DIYing it at your company:

- **Take a survey to get to the baseline read on what's going on.** Prior to implementing Jam Day, we sent around a survey to get a read on the mental health and happiness of Brains on Fire. The message was clear: people were struggling to be productive due to constant interruptions from an increasing number of meetings being added to their calendars. Being away from our desks on and off throughout the day was derailing our ability to get things done and driving up stress levels.

A simple internal survey revealed this major pain point for the agency. We were able to help alleviate some of that pressure with the implementation of Jam Day.

Don't assume you know what people are struggling with. Don't assume they will speak up unprompted. Give your team an easy, non-confrontational way to share their thoughts and challenges, and then focus on creating solutions to make it better.

- **Be willing to draw a line in the sand—and stick to it.** There's no way around it: change is hard. When making a radical shift, the boat will rock. You've got to be willing to draw a line in the sand and hold to it. Rest assured, not everyone will love it. Some people might not even like it. There will be some unrest. There will be naysay. But if you are making decisions and implementing processes that support the needs and wants of the greater whole, people will feel that. And if you're willing to be clear about the plan and stick to it, people will respect it and get on board. (And they may even grow to like it in time.)

Our solution was to craft a "Prejamble" that explained why we were implementing Jam Day—and a short list of guideposts explaining HOW it was to be adopted.

We the people, in order to form a more perfect and productive working environment, establish Jam Time, ensure all mental tranquility, provide ample time to produce, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of creativity to ourselves and the whole agency, do ordain and establish this constitution for Brains on Fire, Inc.

As of the 15th day of January in the year 2016, Brains on Fire declares Thursdays shall be free from meetings in order to allow our people one day a week in which to do their thing without interruption. This protected space for productivity will lead to happier employees, realistic deadlines and better work for our clients.

The short of it: moving forward, no meetings are to be scheduled on Thursdays between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m.

The goal of Jam Time is to give us more time in our week and make us more efficient in our workflow so that we are able to create better, more impactful work for our clients. More desk time means more productivity time for all. More productivity time means there should be a decreased need for status meetings, because staff will have an entire day in which to catch up, pull ahead and actually get things done, rather than meeting to talk about getting things done.

Exceptions to the Thursday Jam block will be made only in instances when a factor external to our organization requires it. For example, if a new hire can only interview on a Thursday at 10 a.m., an exception can be made, but only if the meeting attendees are unanimously willing to make the exception. Scheduling an internal meeting on a Thursday simply because it's the only opening in schedules will not qualify for an exception to the Thursday rule. Likewise, if two members of the team choose to get together to work on a project on Thursday, both parties must mutually agree to forgo Jam Time and not distract others who are jamming solo. We ask that you exercise discretion regarding "exceptions" to the Thursday rule. These should be a rarity, and all employees will be expected to make every effort to avoid calling for a meeting on a Thursday.

Every Brains on Fire employee retains the right to decline a meeting invitation during Thursday Jam Time. Thursday is YOUR day to get YOUR work done, and will be protected by Brains on Fire as such. In the event a meeting is called on a Thursday, it is your right to decline it without penalty or sass from anyone else. Be respectful of the rule. Love it. Cherish it. We hope to be better for it – and doing better work because of it.

Thoughts on Jam Day from BOF's Social Strategist



MOE RICE

Brains on Fire Social Strategist

O Jam Day, my Jam Day. A shining beacon of catch-up in a stormy sea of meetings. A haven of soft silence in a roar of open-office distractions. A shelter from shoulder taps, defense from disorder, asylum from annoyance. Jam Day, you make Thursdays look good. Straight up, I want to be real with you: you're my favorite day of the week. (Don't tell the others.)

Fact: We work in an incredible office with incredible people. The office? One part incredible, one part incredibly open. The people? One part incredible, one part incredibly close. About 50% of our work requires active collaboration. For that, an in-office presence is great. When it's time to put your nose to the grindstone, however, it's a different story.

Enter Jam Day, a natural progression in the way we work at Brains on Fire.

How has Jam Day impacted the Community Team overall?

Our community team is comprised of introverts. We're social in nature, but creatively recharge and thrive in solitude. As a team of people creating content day in and day out, the interruptions of an open office are

sometimes difficult to bear—especially when it comes to calculating and analyzing metrics. Jam Day has become a form of productivity refuge we all count on.

Jam Day is the one day a week I can count on to crank out creative work. I am not the type of person who can get a big task done in 30 minutes between meetings. Context switching kills my productivity.

If I ever had any doubts about Jam Day, I recently converted into a fist-shaking evangelist when I lost access to it for just two weeks. Due to a client transition, I needed to be in-office for meetings on Thursdays. As the days turned, other tasks piled up. I began to drown in a sea of other tasks, finally resigning myself to being days behind on deliverables until I could find time to play catch-up. (Sorry, AEs!)

Fast forward to my first Jam Day after the dry spell. (It felt like Christmas morning!) I woke up in my house, immediately got to work, and began the arduous task of digging out from under my list in sweet silence and the company of my fuzzy children.

What has been the biggest Jam Day struggle and success?

Our most notable Jam Day struggle has been getting the entire team to respect it. It's easy and tempting to schedule a meeting on a day with no other conflicts. In our Declaration of Jam, we did build in a clause for exceptions to the rule, but internal catch-ups are not one of them. We should be proud to preserve and protect one day a week for our team to work their creative magic and focus on deliverables. Can't we all just jam along?

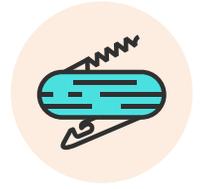
On the other flipside, our biggest success has been implementing this policy to begin with. We have a vast array of characters, work styles and preferences aboard the good ship BOF. The fact that Jam Day has happened at all is a testament to our culture. Even if the concept is a little uncomfortable for some, it was approved and adopted for the greater good of our team, work and clients.

Tips/advice for making the most of your remote days?

Prefer to get up early and slay task dragons with a slosh of joe? More of a night owl, clacking away at your computer into the wee hours of the night? Chronic advice Slacker? Just want to get off the grid for the day?

My philosophy is jam however you want, work on your own time. As long as you get things done and communicate effectively with your team, the power of the jam is in your hands.

Toolbox



When it comes to implementing a remote workplace, communication tools are key—and there are a million options out there. What works for a giant agency may not be right for a boutique team of five. While you do some digging and dabbling, here are a few of our favorites to get you started:

Google Drive

Google Drive makes file sharing and real-time collaboration a breeze. It's also accessible from any device.

Slack

Not only does Slack provide an internal messaging platform for direct one-on-one chats, you can also set up group chats (by client or project) for team collaboration. We've even added group chats for "Show and Tell" where people can share snippets of projects they're working on, and a "Gratitude" channel for giving public nods of appreciation. (And can we talk about that Giphy integration...)

High Five

High Five is our video conferencing of choice. Simple and streamlined.

Uberconference

Uberconference is a great service for group calls. It offers a host of features like dialing out to participants at call time, screen sharing, call recording and the ability to customize your hold tone. (Because let's be honest, nothing amps up conference call participants like a little pre-call J. Bieber.)

SOURCES + ADDITIONAL READING

- *How to Effectively Manage Remote Teams*
- *6 Ways Work Will Change in 2016*
- *Managing a Remote Workforce*
- *10 Stats About Remote Employment*
- *Remote Employees are Way More Productive Than Office Dwellers*
- *Remote Working is the Future, and it Should be the Present*



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