Strategies for Working Remotely: Making the Transition to Virtual Software Teams

A Panel Discussion

Panelists:
Jay Jay Billings, ORNL – Group Leader of Research Software Engineering
Mark Gates, University of Tennessee – Assistant Research Professor
Mahantesh Halappanavar, PPNL – Data Sciences Group Leader
Angela Herring, LANL – Staff Scientist
Axel Huebl, LBNL – Postdoctoral Scholar

Moderators: Elaine Raybourn, SNL – IDEAS-ECP, Ashley Barker, ORNL – ECP CAM
Who are we?

- Staff at U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) laboratories
- Involved in the DOE Exascale Computing Project (ECP)
  - [https://www.exascaleproject.org](https://www.exascaleproject.org)
- Currently working remotely
Agenda

• Brief introductions from panelist addressing prompts:
  – Advice you would give to someone just getting started.
  – Challenges you have experienced.
  – Unforeseen benefits.
  – Opportunities to look for from this experience.

• Q&A:
  – Type question in Zoom chat box.
  – Moderator will ask you to ask your question.

• Slides, video, and bios from today:
  – https://www.exascaleproject.org/event/virtualsoftwareteams/
Jay Jay Billings – Opening Remarks

• **Advice**
  – Managers: Be willing to make a video call as quickly as you would be to walk down the hall – your people need you!
  – Everyone: Focus on your mental health by getting outside (trees make you as happy as Christmas!) and doing lots of video chats with colleagues and friends

• **Challenges**
  – We were g2g on distributed work and remote for a few days. Not ready for 100% remote 100% of the time.
    • Not everyone had a home office – no gear, no desk, poor internet, etc.
    • New types of physical and mental stress, requiring new outlets

• **Unforeseen benefits**
  – Productivity jumped by roughly 2x: Closing tickets faster, better.

• **Opportunities to look for from this experience**
  – How can we maximize our productivity by embracing "work from where you work best" philosophy?
Mark Gates – Opening Remarks

• **Advice**
  – Work with multiple collaboration tools (email, Slack, Zoom, Google docs, etc.)
  – Check in frequently, to replace informal hallway conversations

• **Challenges**
  – With COVID-19, hiring is more difficult, particularly international

• **Unforeseen benefits**
  – Local and remote team members are treated equally – no one left out of local discussion or visuals
  – Switching meetings is near instantaneous

• **Opportunities to look for from this experience**
  – Learn remote collaboration tools better to benefit future collaborations
  – Institutions develop more flexible policies to enable remote work
Mahantesh Halappanavar – Opening Remarks

• **Advice (observations)**
  – The way an organization treats its staff and the local community will determine its *long-term success*
  – Every person is going through the experience in a unique way, being *nonjudgmental* is important
  – *Charity* in all forms is now essential
  – Regular and frequent *communication* is fundamental

• **Challenges**
  – *Remote paired programming* is a challenge (SME – Algorithms – Programmers – Performance & testing)
  – *Recruitment* and regular *commitment* are a challenge (pulled onto perform different roles)
  – *Ergonomic* challenges
  – Retaining the *human* touch

• **Unforeseen benefits**
  – Higher productivity from lack of *commute* and *travel*
  – We are getting to *learn* a little bit more about each other
  – Greater *tolerance* of each other
  – Greater opportunities for *learning* (e.g., soft skills, programming skills)

• **Opportunities to look for from this experience**
  – Better *work-life balance*; better tools for collaboration; a cleaner world
Angela Herring – Opening Remarks

• **Advice**
  – Don’t forget the human connection. Technical meetings do not build or maintain camaraderie.
  – Virtual water cooler times are excellent team building opportunities.
  – Don’t be afraid to call people individually. This gives an opportunity to connect on more than just technical topics. Think of it as replacing hallway chats and walks to meetings around campus.

• **Challenges**
  – Electronic communication lacks nuance. We must remind ourselves to interpret electronic communications graciously.

• **Unforeseen benefits**
  – My teams have made an extra effort to build in appropriate social connection time; we discuss everything from where to find supplies in town (groceries! fabric!) to our hobbies. This has led to increased engagement with each other and, ultimately, stronger teams.
  – Work-life balance is easier to achieve without transition costs. I love the flexibility and working outside on my deck.

• **Opportunities to look for from this experience**
  – This has shown us on a large scale that work from home is productive. Let’s seize this opportunity to hire more part-time, remote workers. Especially for remote locations like Los Alamos, it should give us more choice and diversity in our hires.
Axel Huebl – Opening Remarks

• **Advice**
  – Embrace efficient **communication**, transparency of **decision** processes, **documentation** and **accountability**.

• **Challenges**
  – Over/-under **sharing**: communication methods, planning, feedback and inspiration.
    “(Zoom) meetings that could have been an e-mail”, vs. “Hm, haven’t heard from X in a month, are they still with us?”
  – **Balance**: Help each other and stay productive. In an office situation, people see you are need help/a break/are already occupied – *indicate* this remotely, too.

• **Unforeseen benefits**
  – Teams that already have **strong open (source) routines** will improve their workflows with fully **open development** practices (issues, kanban, summaries of offline discussions, release planning, continuous documentation, etc.). This leads to a **more inclusive work environment** for teams & collaborations.

• **Opportunities to look for from this experience**
  – Live-communication (Slack, Zoom, hallway meetings) can be quick & effective but also problematic in common situations. Parenting, vacations/PTO, hobbies, trips, etc. are **good reasons for not being permanently reachable**. People are able to learn to self-organize their daily routines, all2all overlap of a few fixed hours (e.g. 2hrs / day; 2-3 days a week) might be sufficient. Embracing **asynchronous working hours** can improve focus (less interruptions) and increases overall productivity.
• **Working Remotely: The Spack Team**
  - T. Gamblin, E. Raybourn, 5/16/2020, blog post

• **Remote Working in an Agile World**
  - R. Bartlett, 4/12/2020, intro to podcast by BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT

• **Resources for Maximizing Remote Working**
  - E. Raybourn, 3/18/2020, curated content on:
    - *Remote versus co-located work*
    - *The remote work playbook*
    - *How to lead in the age of newly remote teams*
    - *COVID-19 and the shift to remote work*

• **Clean Your Work Surfaces: One Way to Help Flatten the Curve**
  - M.C. Miller, 3/19/2020

• And more to come …