AN SMB’S ULTIMATE GUIDE TO BUILDING A HIGH-PERFORMING VIRTUAL TEAM

FALL 2020
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VIRTUAL TEAMS — THE NEW PARADIGM

Intermedia’s recent survey revealed that 57% of small business owners will continue to provide remote working options for their employees in the long term. Covid-19 may have forced many companies initially into remote work, but they’re quickly beginning to see its many benefits.

This shows how receptive SMBs have become to working with virtual teams.

It’s not surprising when you consider the numerous benefits SMBs realize with a virtual setup. With an efficient remote team, you can increase productivity and profitability — while avoiding hefty facility-related fees.

This report will show you what it takes to build — and run — an effective, productive virtual team. It’s filled with focused how to’s and step-by-step lists that will help you build a crack virtual team.
THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING A VIRTUAL TEAM

Established companies, such as global freelancing platform Toptal and WordPress owner Automattic, grew their companies almost exclusively with virtual teams. Done right, running a virtual team can take your business to the next level.

With a virtual team, you can:

GAIN ACCESS TO GLOBAL TALENT

Having workers spread across the world will bring global perspectives, creativity, and innovation to your company and projects. Your talent search is no longer geographically limited — you can hire experts and specialists from across the globe. A talent shortage in your market may not exist in other parts of the world.

What's more, your virtual team helps you learn new trends, insights, and best practices from other markets around the world. For example, if you’re considering expanding your market into another part of the world, having local team members on the ground can add insights, access, and local expertise. This is especially important if that market’s main language is not English.

Despite location and time zone limitations, global teams are highly collaborative and low maintenance.

CUT COSTS

You’re thinking about building a team, how to build it, and the expertise they bring. But a virtual team produces some impressive side benefits as well. Businesses can decrease spending on office space, utilities, cleaning services, food, and taxes, among other things.

And these savings add up. Global Workplace Analytics estimates that businesses can save an average of $11,000 per half-time telecommuter per year.

This decrease in overhead expenses results from lower real estate costs, reduced absences and turnover, and increased productivity.
BRING PRODUCT TO MARKET FASTER

Employing a global virtual team lets you hire workers worldwide, enabling you to run your projects 24 hours a day. The sun need never set on your projects: As one team's day ends, another's begins.

If you develop software, shortened product development time means you can offer products or services faster to meet rising market demand.

INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY AND PROFIT

The workplace survey conducted by IWG showed that 85% of businesses believe they have higher productivity because of flexible working policies. In fact, 89% of employees also reported increased productivity due to remote work.

High employee productivity translates to high profitability.

Companies that use virtual teams have a clear advantage over their competitors who rely solely on local talent. Virtual teams experience increased productivity, less employee turnover, and higher production.

WHERE TO FIND EXCEPTIONAL ONLINE FREELANCERS

According to Carol Taylor, Director of Content Experience at Microsoft, “One of the biggest advantages of utilizing freelancers is finding a great variety of talent with different skills. And bringing on new talent quickly as our needs change.”

You can find a wide selection of highly specialized talent from around the world on established online freelance marketplaces. As virtual work grows, more companies emerge to accommodate the talent search.

Consider these trusted platforms when looking for virtual employees.

UPWORK

Upwork acts as an intermediary connecting businesses to freelancers across the globe. It provides a sophisticated, reliable workspace for safe and convenient collaboration.

With thousands of freelancers offering a variety of services, you should be able to find the perfect freelancer whatever your business need. You’ll find freelancers offering services such as customer service, virtual assistance, design, website building, development, writing, and even lawyers.

Upwork’s custom search allows you to narrow the candidates to those who fit your requirements. You can filter by experience, location, availability, rate, and more.
Use Upwork’s Talent Service, and your talent specialist will serve up a shortlist of candidates within a week. This can save you time and let the experts bring you a curated list of top candidates.

While it often takes 6 to 8 weeks to find qualified candidates through staffing agencies, Upwork can often deliver results in 1 to 3 days.

And check this out: GE partnered with Upwork to triple its external talent pool in creatives and customer service while reducing the recruitment process to less than a day.

Fiverr

Freelancers at Fiverr offer a wide variety of services starting at $5. While this low price was Fiverr’s initial USP, many highly qualified providers now offer packaged services for prices higher than $5. Yet, many services are still available for just $5. For some small jobs, it can be a perfect solution.

Fiverr features a private communication platform, multi-currency support, and secure payment gateways allowing clients and freelancers to work and transact business online safely.

If you work with Fiverr sellers, screen them thoroughly. Check out their rating, portfolio, and feedback from previous customers, among other things. And if you find a good one, guard their details because you may need them again.

The providers at Fiverr offer myriad services that you can leverage to grow your business. Source: fiverr.com.
LinkedIn (purchased by Microsoft in 2016) is another great place to find virtual team members because its user base is made up of professionals whose online bios show their past employers, job roles, and other relevant experience.

LinkedIn members, who number over 700 million in 200 countries and territories, tend to have more enterprise-level experience than Fiverr or Upwork candidates. So if you’re a tech startup, for instance, you might find a veteran there who fits your needs.

Here, too, you can use advanced search filters to discover freelancers who fit the job role you’re trying to fill. You can set filters based on location, past engagements, industry, etc.

After finding a LinkedIn candidate who seems a good fit, send a direct message or connection request to set an appointment to speak. Considering LinkedIn’s millions of active users, there’s a good chance you can find your next team member in the platform.

Here’s another great thing about LinkedIn: It’s more community focused and networked than Upwork or Fiverr, which means you can often interact with other LinkedIn members in forums, groups, and one-to-one to assist your search or share information. It’s easy to strike up a relationship with some members, and they may have solid tips (or even introductions) to help you find the perfect candidate.

By using platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr, and LinkedIn, you gain access to thousands of highly skilled professionals and can shorten the process of building your virtual team.
HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SCREENING PROCESS

As with any hiring source, you need to screen your candidates carefully. Shortcut this step, and you’re opening yourself to unnecessary stress, headaches, and frustration.

These tips will improve your screening process:

**LIST SPECIFIC JOB DESCRIPTIONS**

You’ll need to provide a detailed job description if you use any of the sites above, and others. You’ll need to include a job summary, responsibilities and duties, working conditions, qualifications, and job specifications.

If you have some absolute “must-haves,” list them prominently. This will save you time later and eliminate many unqualified candidates. If you look at Upwork, for example, one big qualifier you can state is to show ONLY U.S. candidates. Companies often do that to overcome language barriers.

Take the time to write specifics for each section of the job description. It will help you filter and narrow down candidates. Remember: It’s as important to filter out unsuitable candidates as it is to attract qualified ones.

If you feel stuck putting together a good job description, have a look at listings seeking similar candidates. For instance, if you want to hire an iOS developer on Upwork, search for that position and look at the ads. Note things in the ads you like and let them influence your listing. It’s a good way to find tips and suggestions that can strengthen your ad.

**FILTER YOUR ONLINE SEARCH**

Use the filter option rigorously to view freelancers on Upwork and other virtual freelancing platforms.

Filter freelancers based on the number of projects they’ve completed and/or the amount of money they’ve earned. People with high earnings are often consistent, professional, and serious about their projects and their work. They wouldn’t earn that much otherwise.

In Upwork, for example, select freelancers who’ve earned over $10,000.
PREPARE A CHECKLIST

Use checklists to streamline your interviews or screening calls. Prepare questions to ask, points to cover, and other vital information you need. Have all the information you need in hand before you speak with the candidate.

AUTOMATE YOUR APPLICATION PROCESS

Technology has become a large part of recruiting and is used by many companies. It will increase your efficiency and exposure to top candidates, and it will make the process easier for you and the candidate. If you want to reach the cream of the crop, adopt technology as much as you can, because you can be sure they will.

You can post job leads on career websites, contact candidates, and sift through applicants by using an Applicant Tracking System (ATS). It automates menial tasks and lets you focus on the candidates it uncovers and how to bring them on board.

Building a remote team becomes less stressful for everyone with a simplified screening process. Don't forget, candidates feel stress in the process as much as you, maybe more. So, a smooth screening and hiring experience encourages them to push through with your company.

The way you interact with a candidate during the hiring process shows them what working with you may be like, so put on your best professional face and make the process as smooth, efficient, and stress-free as possible.

Interviews are another key aspect of the screening process.

Be strategic with your questions. You'll gain a much better understanding of your candidate's character and level of competency.

THESE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WILL HELP YOU LEARN MORE:

1. Tell me about yourself — what do you like to do when you’re not working?
2. What communication method do you prefer? Email, text, Slack?
3. Describe your home work environment.
4. What is your internet speed?
5. What time zone are you in?
6. Have you worked with a virtual team before? Share your experience. What went well and what didn’t?
7. Tell me about a time when you made a critical mistake in the workplace.
8. Describe a time when you had a conflict with one of your peers.
9. How do you deal with conflicts in a virtual setting?
10. How do you define hard work?
11. What are you most passionate about?
12. What’s the biggest decision you made recently and how did you arrive at the decision?
13. Why should we hire you?
HOW TO STREAMLINE YOUR ONBOARDING PROCESS

You've found a great fit, worked through the interview process, and come to mutual understanding on terms and responsibilities. What's next?

After hiring your new virtual staff, welcome and integrate them into your team through proper onboarding. First days in a new work environment are critical. Make the new teammate feel comfortable, welcomed, and a valued member of the team. That will set the stage for a long and productive relationship.

On the other hand, poor and disorganized starts can result in short and unhappy relationships, sending you back to the dreaded and laborious hiring process.

Set up a clear onboarding workflow to prevent redundancies and needless back-and-forth emails between your new hire and the person integrating them.

Here are tips to develop a streamlined onboarding process for your remote team.
CREATE A CENTRAL PLACE WHERE YOU CAN SHARE YOUR FILES

Use Google Drive or Dropbox to share important documents, such as contracts, NDA, policies, and all necessary paperwork.

Use cloud-based platforms to share files instead of sending them as email attachments. It also supports real-time collaboration, making the process seamless. After all, you and your virtual team will be sending many documents via the cloud, so it’s a good practice to start early.

SHARE YOUR LOGINS (WITHOUT SHARING YOUR PASSWORDS)

To streamline the process of sharing access to your online tools, let your new hire sign up for a LastPass account. The platform allows you to share your logins WITH multiple users without revealing your passwords.

LastPass is used by MANY SMBs to prevent password fatigue for employees and strengthen password security for companies.

Two other password management alternatives you can use are Dashlane and Keeper.

MEET THE TEAM

Use appointment scheduling tools, such as Google Calendar or Calendly, to set up a conference call on or before your remote team’s first day. This establishes good rapport at the start of the project.

It also allows your remote team to meet the people they will work with.

Most SMBs use video conferencing platforms, such as Slack, Zoom, and Skype, for seamless video calls.

IMPLEMENT A BUDDY SYSTEM

Have an established team member guide your new remote worker as they learn the ropes. It’s better if the buddy is a counterpart of your new remote staff.

In fact, Buffer implements a “virtual buddy” system. With this, new hires can meet people who can offer expert advice and help communicate concerns. Be sure your new team member doesn’t feel isolated or without access when they need it. A good buddy system will ensure this doesn’t happen.
**EXTEND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Once your new team member successfully finishes a few tasks, give them a small project to use their skills further. It also gives you a chance to test them out with added responsibility.

When extending responsibilities, provide the context of the project, set expectations clearly, and give them points of contact in case they need direction or help.

**CHECK IN REGULARLY**

Initiate conversations regularly with new team members, even if it’s not work related.

This shows you are approachable, builds rapport, and reduces the feeling of isolation that is common with remote workers.

Remember the onboarding process starts from the first day until your new hire has fully adapted.

Smart hiring, intentional onboarding, and frequent communication lead to better collaboration with global remote teams — not to mention longer, more productive relationships.
HOW TO OPTIMIZE YOUR TEAM COLLABORATION

Refine how your virtual team collaborates, and you’ll see your productivity increase, expenses drop, and deliverables emerge a lot faster.

Using a reliable project management platform can play a crucial role in this. With a robust platform, you can stay on top of all the moving parts: send tasks, ask for updates, and track your projects, all in one place.

monday.com, for example, is a top-rated project management software tool used by established companies such as Adobe and Uber.

With monday.com, you can create and assign tasks, plan timelines, collaborate with remote teams, and even set up workflow automations.
The platform also offers reporting features that consolidate your team’s data from multiple projects, which gives you insightful reports about your team’s productivity and progress. These reports are an excellent tool to coach and mentor team members and detect possible problems.

monday.com also allows you to integrate important third-party applications such as Dropbox, Slack, and Zoom, among others. Regardless how good a software solution is, if it won’t integrate with the rest of your software infrastructure, it’s probably not a good choice.

**PROVIDE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS**

Indicate who’s responsible for each task, what output is expected, the deadline, and whatever nuances need to be considered to make sure the tasks are done correctly.

Don’t assume your employees know your expectations. There’s a good chance they see things from a different perspective, especially if they’re from another country and operate from their cultural bias, just like you do. Cultural differences can be accommodated and overcome, but it takes communication and clearly expressing your needs and expectations.

In most cases, over-communication is the way to go. And don’t totally rely on text or chat. Nothing improves communication like a real-time video chat from time to time.

**BOOST TEAM ENGAGEMENT**

The lack of face-to-face interaction shouldn’t hinder you from forming a great work culture.

Set weekly video conferences to check in with your team. Zoom is useful for gathering large online meetings as it can hold up to 100 participants per call.

Companies such as Nestle, Spotify, and Walmart use Facebook Workplace to improve collaboration and communication among employees. It may work well for you, too. But be aware that some social media apps are limited or prohibited in some countries. Double-check with your team members on what’s standard in their country.

You can also create a “random” channel on Slack where anyone can share news, industry insights, jokes, or memes. It creates a space where team culture can thrive online.

And don’t always make it about work. Talk to team members about their personal lives, too. When you ask how they are on a personal level, it makes your relationship more organic. And
it makes you more “real” to members thousands of miles away.

It fosters warmth and a sense of camaraderie, which ultimately makes your team more cohesive.

**KEEP TRACK OF SHIFTS AND WORKLOAD**

Without proper tracking, you can easily overload your remote team with tasks. If left unchecked, this can overwhelm them and cause burnout. This often happens to SMBs that don’t use a project management platform that allows time clock tracking.

Time tracking software gives a bird’s-eye view of your team members’ schedule and availability.

For example, Homebase’s drag-and-drop scheduling tool helps you see conflicts in your team’s shifts. It lets you adjust your team’s schedule and workload.

Homebase also lets you share schedules with your team members, keeping them updated with each person’s shift.

Looking at your Homebase account, you can tell which employees are working long hours, and which have very little on their plate. This information will help you distribute hours and tasks evenly.

With a top-level view of your entire team’s work hours, you can distribute work effectively. Source: joinhomebase software.
HOW TO MOTIVATE YOUR VIRTUAL TEAM

Your team's motivation level significantly impacts your company's performance.

It's simple (but not always easy): Keep your virtual team highly motivated, and they're going to operate more efficiently. You'll reduce costs, increase productivity, and have a more stable workforce. Team members, after all, are likely to stay loyal to a company where they feel motivated and challenged.

Have a look at these tried-and-tested strategies to motivate and empower your virtual team:

**SCHEDULE A REGULAR ONE-ON-ONE MEETING**

Check in with your team members regularly to bridge whatever gaps there might be between you and them. The more time you spend with them, the more you inspire openness and transparency.

Use tools such as Zoom or Skype to set up a video call to make your meeting more personal.

Ask how they are doing with work and life. Quiz them to see if they have any difficulties with their tasks or at home. In many cultures, this kind of personal relationship may be more important than in yours. Of course, the opposite may be true, too, so be aware of your team members’ cultures, and show respect.
Be sure they know you’re always AVAILABLE despite the distance.

This is also a good chance for you to discover and fix any concerns your team members have regarding a project, a colleague, or your business. They’ll feel more open in a one-on-one than they will in a team call. Assure them your conversations are confidential so they feel comfortable talking about anything bothering them.

Listening to your remote team, considering their suggestions, and implementing them will motivate them because they are now aware of their impact on your business.

**RECOGNIZE AND REWARD YOUR REMOTE TEAM**

Simple appreciation goes a long way when reminding your remote team that you value them.

Giving recognition and incentives to your top-performing employee or giving a bonus for a job well done are simple yet effective ways to motivate your team.

You can also use recognition and rewards platforms such as Kazoo or Bonusly to encourage peer-to-peer recognition.

Your remote team can use these reward platforms to give points to each other and use those points to buy gift cards or receive cash.

**GIVE FEEDBACK**

Provide quick and effective feedback to let your remote team know their progress.

Have a quick chat with a member to appreciate their work or point out an error that should be fixed.

For feedback or messages on the sensitive side, schedule a call with the employee to discuss the matter in detail.

Don’t send emails or private messages when sharing sensitive feedback. This will avoid miscommunication and needless tension.

**MEET WITH YOUR REMOTE TEAM**

If the situation allows it, meet with your team physically for coffee or for team-building activities to strengthen your bond. Some companies with remote teams schedule an annual off-site meeting that strengthens bonds and lets remote workers get to know each other.

You can also offer overseas members a chance to visit your office. Doing so will give them a strong sense of belonging and motivate them to work closer with the team.
HOW TO CONDUCT EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK

Help your virtual team grow both in skill and character by conducting regular employee feedback.

Don’t neglect these feedback sessions even if it’s a difficult and stressful experience. It’s an absolute must-do if you want a high-performing virtual team. But exercise candor, even if it’s difficult.

Talk about areas to improve, but also recognize the great things they’ve done. It’s important that you elicit their input and feedback so they know their contributions are valued and important to the company.

You can use HR software to improve your feedback process.

For example, jointly set goals with your employees and monitor progress using BambooHR’s centralized employee profile. This can be a good way for you to have ongoing discussions with them on their progress. You may even want to schedule quarterly or semi-annual meetings just for this topic.
At the end of the day, consistent and meaningful feedback with your virtual team will give them a clearer perspective of where they stand in the company, which is essential if you want a healthy work culture.

**Consider these helpful tips when conducting employee feedback.**

**MAKE FEEDBACK A REGULAR HABIT**

Employees want to receive regular feedback. Don’t just wait for scheduled review sessions; make it an ongoing exercise. The occasional pat on the back or recognition goes a long way, and it means even more to remote members, who often feel out of the loop.

Feedback can be a crucial factor to align with your remote team. With regular evaluation, you boost employee productivity, set goals and milestones clearly, and help your remote team evaluate their performance.

And don’t forget, evaluations consist of positives and negatives. You can help your remote staff to recognize their strengths and improve on weaknesses, as well as establish a better relationship between you and your remote workers.

Schedule feedback sessions with your remote team, but be sure to give on-the-spot feedback as well.

**IMPLEMENT AN OKR**

Objective and Key Results, or OKR, is a results-oriented goal management framework.

Michael Luther, Regional Training and Development Coordinator at Whole Trade Market, said that implementing OKR helped them improve discussions during meetings and helped each person see their goals and accomplishments from the past week.

To implement your OKR, tools such as Weekdone offer affordable packages and integrated features perfect for SMBs.

Using an OKR will help you set goals easily, track progress, and provide feedback for your remote teams.

**GIVE EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK**

How you say or structure your feedback can make a difference to the person receiving it.

To provide feedback effectively, Impraise trains its staff to use the COIN formula.
COIN stands for:

- **Context**: defining the situation
- **Observation**: describing the behavior
- **Impact**: clarifying the impact
- **Next**: making a suggestion

Applying this formula would look like this:

This formula makes it easy and impactful to provide positive and constructive feedback.

Keep in mind that your conversation is two-way, and feedback is reciprocal. Give your employees the opportunity to share their feedback about the company. Workers are more likely to commit to a company that takes and acts on their feedback.

Encouraging employees to share their feedback offers many rewards. It optimizes your business process, improves your work culture, and helps diffuse or prevent conflict.

In some companies, workers hold back and remain silent because of a fear of negative consequences when they give honest, critical feedback. Don’t be that company. Although you can’t always respond to team member feedback, the fact that you make team members feel comfortable expressing their thoughts is key.
REMOTE IS THE FUTURE OF WORK

Remote work is no longer a trend.

In the last decade, the number of people working remotely at least once per week has grown by 400%.

In fact, HubSpot employed more than 300 full-time remote employees this year and offered partial remote options for office-based staff.

Buffer reports that 99% of their respondents said they would like remote work to be an option for the rest of their careers.

Running virtual teams is becoming the norm. If you’re in the process of creating a virtual team for your business, consider the tips shared in this guide. To access more resources on how to grow your SMB, visit The Blueprint now.

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