

**Examining Remote-First Processes And Practices On The Operational Efficiency And Employee
Integration In Small Technology Companies Post-Covid-19**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the major adoption of remote-first policies. The concept of working from home (WFH) was a rarity pre-pandemic, with only 5% of Americans having the opportunity to WFH for more than 3 days a week (Yang et al., 2021). However, about 70% of Americans were WFH during the peak of the pandemic, with 58% having WFH opportunities at least 1 day a week (Lucanus, 2021) (Dua, et al., 2022). This transition has reshaped where and how work is done, along with a need for a reevaluation of operational efficiency and employee integration. This paper focuses on small technology companies, which have unique constraints and challenges operating in a remote-first process compared to traditional technology firms. The research question this paper seeks to answer is: How do remote-first processes and practices influence the operational efficiency and employee integration in small technology companies post-COVID-19?

To explore these concepts, this paper presents a case study of Sabres Media LLC, a small, student-led software development consultancy that has operated with a remote-first approach since its founding. The case study analyzes the company's practices, challenges, and adaptations in the face of remote work, to offer insights that apply to similar organizations in the post-pandemic era.

By closely examining the operational and employee integration challenges and opportunities that come with remote-first practices, this research aims to offer actionable guidance for small technology companies in the present and future remote work environment. This will also address the need for literature that highlights the experiences of small technology companies, which have been shadowed in the research of remote work.

Literature Review

Media Theories and Communication

The biggest hurdle in the transition to remote from traditional in-office work models is communication, between both employees and other employees and employees to managers. Media richness theory states that richer communication channels are optimal for communicating complex information and ideas, while media synchronicity theory states that asynchronous channels are better for conveying information while synchronous channels are better for converging on the meaning of that information. These theories can help examine how to set up effective communication for remote workers, who tend to utilize asynchronous communication, which can diminish the connection of ties, collaboration, and ability to access new information (Yang, et al., 2021). For smaller companies with limited employees, it is crucial for collaboration and communication to not be degraded due to an emphasis on asynchronous methods of communicating.

Empirical evidence also supports video conferencing (VC) and face-to-face interactions, even in a remote setting, as far superior to email and instant messaging for positive team performance. A study done on Google's approach to remote and distributed workforces provided feedback by respondents emphasizing the importance of visual, real-time communication, and how they felt received and felt stronger engagement (Karis, et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that respondents also stated that the experience deteriorates with more participants and screens, a limitation to the implementation of scheduled video calls. It's also important to note that small tech companies must cultivate a culture of face-to-face interactions and VC calls, as Yang et al (2021) notes that a shift towards asynchronous communication

occurs in remote settings. This leads to a decrease in synchronous collaboration, something that is necessary for cohesion and innovation, particularly within smaller firms with fewer employees.

Engagement

Operational efficiency and employee integration in remote settings are significantly influenced by the structure and tools adopted by companies. A centralized communication tool like Slack is a tool that can be used to enhance communication, but it must have company-wide acceptance to keep remote and in-office employees synchronized. There must be adequate technology available for remote work, and communication tools must be reviewed to ensure remote-readiness. Google exemplifies this greatly through its use of Google Docs for knowledge transfer and Google Calendar for scheduling VC calls and managing schedules for workers (Karis, et al., 2014).

Engagement strategies, such as gamification, can also be used as an innovative solution to enhance remote work engagement (Baez, n.d.). Gamification can be incorporated into work tasks, adding a sense of achievement and competition that invigorates the remote workforce. This can offset the feelings of uncertainty about what is expected with clear, tangible expectations, and decrease feelings of concern for favoritism for employees who receive face-to-face time in the office. However, the effectiveness of this will vary across different demographics and work types.

The downsides of remote work must be addressed, which can include degradation of communication and isolation. Research from Flores showed that the biggest challenges from remote work included collaboration and communication, developing relationships with

colleagues, and receiving feedback from managers (Flores, 2019). To support this, 21% of workers polled by Gallup reported feelings of loneliness and isolation (Baez, n.d.). This literature reflects the importance of companies, especially smaller ones with fewer team members, to establish lines of communication that prioritize face-to-face interaction, along with team bonding.

Benefits and Challenges of Remote Work

The literature consistently highlights the contrasting results of remote work, presenting both significant advantages and obstacles. On one hand, remote workers often report flexible hours, better work-life balance, and greater autonomy in managing their time. These benefits are important in small technology firms, where agility and innovation are enhanced by the flexibility that remote work affords. Conversely, collaboration, information accessibility, and maintaining a balance between work and personal life pose substantial challenges in remote settings (Flores, M., 2019). Developing relationships with peers, staying informed about company developments, and receiving timely feedback and guidance become more difficult outside the traditional office environment. These challenges underscore the need for intentional design and management of remote work practices to ensure they support, rather than hinder, the operational efficiency and integration of employees within small technology firms.

Sabres Media: A Case Study

Introduction

The case study focuses on Sabres Media LLC, a student-led software development consultancy that specializes in government contracts and SaaS products. Sabres operates asynchronously with a small, remote-first team based in Norfolk, Virginia, but located throughout various parts of the East Coast. Sabres Media's approach to remote work highlights both the benefits and challenges of maintaining operational efficiency and fostering employee integration.

Background

Sabres Media focuses on government contracting, Software as a Service (SaaS) products, and in-house mobile applications. The geographical diversity of the team is a defining characteristic of the company. With co-founders based in Charlottesville and Dartmouth and the rest of the team in Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Durham, Sabres Media has adopted a workplace model that is similar to the remote trend seen today. The differing location, along with the team's university commitments, makes it challenging for a full-time, in-person operation. As a result, remote work and asynchronous collaboration/communication define Sabres' operational model, giving the team the flexibility to further grow the venture while also handling academic and personal commitments.

Implementation of Remote-First Practices at Sabres Media

Remote Work Policies

Sabres Media's operational model is centered around agile methodologies and effective communication. Video conferencing software like Zoom is used for short, 15-minute daily stand-ups to discuss ongoing tasks and immediate priorities. This ensures that everyone is

aligned without wasting significant amounts of time. Additionally, longer, retrospective meetings are done weekly to reflect on accomplishments, areas for improvement, and overall team satisfaction. The agile structure Sabres implements is a standard among tech companies and especially complements those who are oriented to remote-first workflows due to its flexibility. This meeting schedule is in a shared Google Calendar, promoting transparency and accessibility. Larger tech companies like Google also follow this process of integrating virtual conference meetings in a company-wide Google Calendar on a need-to-know basis (Karis, et al., 2014).

Asynchronous communication and collaboration are primarily done through Slack, letting team members share updates, ask questions, and collaborate without real-time interactions. A centralized, ever-growing Notion database contains extensive documentation, fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration. This approach aligns with research stating the competitive advantages of optimizing knowledge transfer processes. For instance, similar strategies have been successfully employed by other small tech companies, such as Levels, which has leveraged a centralized database for ease of access to major documentation, which effectively enhances organizational efficiency (Yang et al., 2021; Haney, 2023).

Operational Strategies for Productivity

Sabres emphasizes tangible results without monitoring team members. This approach aligns with findings by Lucanus (2021), who notes that while remote work can better collaboration, monitoring employee activity could undermine trust and diminish job satisfaction when work quality is perceived to suffer. Sabres counteracts this with software and management tools that promote transparency and instill trust in the company. The CEO states that open communication is at the core of transparency and trust, and the asynchronous work environment

allows for employees to flexibly pace themselves and collaborate with peers, despite geographical and temporal constraints. Screen recording technology like Loom is utilized with the implicit understanding that employees will synthesize information without monitoring. This is paired with standard software development tools, with the tech stack including Git and GitHub for version control, Visual Studio Code for development, Jira for project management, and Webflow for web development tasks. Combining these allows for effective remote collaboration and gives trust to the employees while making sure that the team is synchronized and cohesive.

Employee Integration

The onboarding procedure at Sabres Media aligns with literature that supports a flexible and continuous approach to onboarding. Sabres encourages new team members to follow important onboarding documents in the Notion knowledge base at their own pace. Initial interactions involve one-on-one meetings with a co-founder, while eventually expanding to general meetings and communication channels. This allows newcomers to acclimate to the company's workflows and culture without the pressure of a rigid timeframe. Krasman supports this perspective, stating that onboarding should be viewed as a continuous process that is significant to an employee's early experiences. Pavlina also supports this with research stating that companies with onboarding lasting less than a month are 9% less likely to keep new hires for over a year, compared to longer and less rigid processes (Pavlina, 2020).

Challenges in Remote-First Practices

Sabres had to overcome significant obstacles in its remote-centric work model, notably the feelings of isolation and uncertainty arising from asynchronous workflows. The company

also faced challenges in scheduling meetings aligned with everyone's time commitments, leading to less synchronous collaboration and inconsistent work hours due to the self-paced work process. These challenges line up with research stating that remote-first processes can lead towards static and isolated work environments, with a decrease in synchronous collaboration (Yang, et al., 2021).

A unique challenge not deeply explored through literature was the reluctance to engage in synchronous or in-person work after the company had set a precedent for a remote environment. This was highlighted during an incoming project deadline and the team found it difficult to coordinate their schedules for meetings and sync-ups. The enhanced flexibility became a burden when the shift to in-person was necessary, as team members had adapted to highly individual work schedules. This misalignment resulted in delayed decision-making processes and reduced the efficiency of collaborative efforts. This type of challenge was likely to be further amplified due to the asynchronous nature of Sabres's operations.

Analysis

The self-paced culture, emphasis on face-to-face interactions during scheduled and unscheduled voice conferences, and utilization of technologies and tools like Slack, Notion, and Zoom, allow Sabres Media to be agile and flexible in its team and work location. Sabres follows the media synchronicity theory, providing context that communication in remote settings should be established to prioritize synchronous collaboration with video call software and calls. The media richness theory is also utilized effectively, with Sabres having their retrospective meetings to convey complex information (Yang, et al., 2021). Their use of centralized communication and knowledge base tools like Notion and Slack is also similar to standards set by major technology

companies like Google (Karis, et al., 2014). The tools are standard across Sabres and utilized by all members as the primary way to convey ideas and information.

However, Sabres Media's challenges, including feelings of isolation among team members, difficulties in scheduling synchronous meetings, and shifting the work culture to in-person tasks when necessary, echo the literature's concerns about the potential downsides of remote work.

Challenges and Opportunities

The primary challenges faced by Sabres Media, particularly around feelings of isolation and the complexities of scheduling in a fully remote environment, reflect broader issues in remote work. Addressing these challenges requires a careful balance between leveraging technology for operational efficiency and nurturing a work culture that supports employee well-being and integration.

Isolation in Remote Settings

Isolation, often exacerbated in remote work environments, can lead to decreased employee morale and engagement. Sabres Media's experience suggests that without the casual, spontaneous interactions that occur naturally in an office setting, employees may feel disconnected from the team and the organization's goals. This sense of detachment can be particularly challenging during periods of high stress or tight deadlines when team cohesion is most needed. Future strategies might include implementing regular virtual social events, structured and consistent team check-ins, and perhaps most importantly, training for managers on how to recognize and address signs of isolation and burnout in their teams in remote settings.

Scheduling Complexities

The complexities of scheduling in a remote environment also pose a significant challenge. Sabres Media's fully remote operation requires accommodating different time zones and personal commitments, which can complicate meeting planning and project timelines. To address these issues, adopting flexible but clear guidelines on availability and expected response times can help. Additionally, using advanced scheduling tools that can automatically find optimal meeting times and transparently share availability within teams might improve coordination and reduce the scheduling burden on individuals.

Opportunities in Remote-First Practices

Conversely, the shift to remote-first practices presents numerous opportunities. Sabres Media's adoption of these practices has demonstrated benefits such as enhanced flexibility in work arrangements, access to a larger talent pool that isn't limited by geography, and potentially increased productivity due to reduced commuting times and more focused work periods. These advantages underscore the potential of remote-first practices to reshape how small technology companies operate, making them more adaptable and potentially more competitive in a global market.

Implications for Small Technology Companies

The Sabres Media case offers valuable lessons for other small technology companies contemplating a shift to or the optimization of remote-first policies. The importance of selecting appropriate communication and project management tools cannot be overstated, as these are foundational to maintaining operational efficiency and fostering employee integration in a

remote work environment. Additionally, Sabres Media's approach to addressing the challenges of isolation and collaboration through structured communication provides a blueprint for others to follow.

Conclusion

This study examines the influence of remote-first processes and practices on operational efficiency and employee integration in small technology companies after COVID-19 using the case study of Sabres Media LLC as well as a comprehensive literature review. The findings highlight strategic communication, the use of project management tools, and the fostering of a supportive company culture to navigate challenges and opportunities associated with remote work. Moreover, it shows that when rightly implemented, despite isolation issues and collaboration problems, remote-first approaches can substantially improve operational efficiency and promote employee integration.

Through an in-depth examination of remote work implications for small technology companies, this research paper contributes to the existing literature. This analysis presents practical instances of how businesses can overcome some common difficulties that arise during remote employment like maintaining team cohesiveness and ensuring effective communication amongst geographically dispersed working groups as depicted by Sabres Media LLC. It also stresses well-designed but adaptable communication rituals and calculated application of technology in sustaining remote workplaces.

However, this research has its limitations. The focus on a single case study does not fully capture the diversity of experiences across the small technology sector. Additionally, the

literature findings were all based closely on the peak or right after the peak of the pandemic, and with restrictions on travel being lifted, new work models like a hybrid of in-person and remote can provide new insights and impact on how companies can operate. More importantly, the case study examined a small technology company, Sabres Media LLC, which operates with a remote and asynchronous model. This specific setup could influence the results and applicability of the findings regarding remote work practices. Sabres also benefits from a unique sense of camaraderie among its team members, who share connections that go beyond professional interactions. The team's demographic similarities in age and stage of life might also reduce friction typically associated with adopting remote work models. These factors create a chemistry for Sabres that may not fully represent the rest of the technology industry.

Future research could expand upon this study by exploring a broader range of small technology companies and including multiple industry contexts to further validate and refine the findings presented here. Investigating the long-term effects of remote-first practices on company culture and employee well-being could also provide valuable insights. Additionally, in-depth studies focusing on the root causes of isolation and the decline in effective communication within remote work environments are also necessary. Understanding why these issues are often exacerbated in remote settings could lead to the development of more effective strategies to mitigate these challenges in the future.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complexities and potential of remote-first practices in the evolving landscape of work post-COVID-19. By navigating the challenges and leveraging the opportunities that are inherent in remote work, small technology companies can foster a more flexible, efficient, and integrated workforce, poised to thrive in the digital age.

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