



# **HONEY, I SHRUNK THE OFFICE**

# Remote working demands the right tools and infrastructure, but also the right attitudes

BY CARLY MINSKY

A decade has passed since a Canadian software developer started telecommuting to work using what one journalist described as “a coat rack on wheels” as his responsive robotic surrogate. In that decade tremendous progress has been made in the field of robotics, and telecommunication more generally, but perhaps more striking is that company attitudes towards a remote, mobile or virtual workforce have all but stalled, if not regressed in this time.

The famous coat rack – also known as IvanAnywhere – was developed as a tool to help Ivan Bowman work remotely in Halifax, Nova Scotia, but take advantage of a physical presence and sensory experience in the company office 840 miles away in Waterloo, Ontario.

Though it was praised at the time for facilitating a more seamless and natural interaction between Bowman and his colleagues, removing the friction points they had previously experienced with voice calls, video calls and a static webcam, enthusiasm and uptake for similar projects just has not materialised.

Even a cursory cost-benefit analysis on this type of tool allowing remote workers to maintain a virtual presence in the office quickly reveals an explanation for this. Though there are many technical jobs where first-person sensory experience and interaction is hugely important, if the main challenge of remote working is simply a matter of communication, a robot surrogate doesn't seem to add much value beyond what could be achieved by cheaper and less disruptive tools, like instant messengers and video conferencing.

It's easy for technologists to get excited about how technology might impact the real or virtual workplace. Gary Collier, co-CTO at Man AHL, admits that robots in the office, or more sophisticated tools like Microsoft's “augmented reality” hololens, are appealing. Holographics could revolutionise work that is fundamentally visual – like medical surgery or electric engineering – and project employees virtually into meetings. But it's not obvious whether these applications in a hedge fund environment could justify investing in the products.

“For human contact, it is less obvious that it is a game-changer,” Collier says.

Whether or not firms are open to employees sending a robot or a hologram into the office in their place – few have even trialled the products – they are facing up to a reality in which employees prefer more flexibility around where they spend their work hours.

This can require a rethink of the technical tools, systems, networks and access points used by employees, both for security and practical reasons. To start, instant messag-

ing services and collaborative forums, cloud-based document storage and sharing, already ubiquitous in much of the tech and development sphere, rise in prominence and importance.

Slack, Google Drive, HipChat, Jira and GitHub are among the platforms used to manage tasks across remote developers, including whole teams based in a remote office, or outsourcing a specific projects to external developers in a distant location.

For the latter in particular, protecting valuable information, assets and intellectual property like proprietary code is crucial.

Software project management tools and platforms – like Jira and GitHub – are designed to facilitate collaboration and engender trust between contributors who may not necessarily share exactly the same vision or goals, all the while providing an appropriate level of controls for security and access protection.

Man AHL's Collier made use of GitHub to host a cut-down codebase for an external team of developers to use while working on a short-term project. A bespoke version of Jira promoted agile-style task management across two development teams in different locations.

In a sense, software development teams are well-positioned to manage remote working, despite the significant security risks.

“Open-source is and always has been about remote and distributed teams working on a shared codebase,” Collier says.

Open-source database company MongoDB also see flexibility as a crucial company trait fostered by the values of open-source collaboration.

Carol Teskey, senior director for people, EMEA & APAC at MongoDB, explains: “A flexible working environment has been in MongoDB's DNA since it was founded ten years ago. In practice, that means empowering our employees to work when, where and how they feel will be most productive. Often that's in one of our offices and often it's not.

“How do we make it work? Of course we have a suite of technologies that enable collaboration including the Google collaboration tools, Slack for chat, BlueJeans for video calls, etc. But those are not the things that make a success or failure of flexible working. What matters is culture.”

A central aspect of this culture, Teskey says, is the “radical candidness” expected from everyone at the company.

But commitment to the principles, policies and culture of remote working is no guarantee a company will make a success of it. Long-seen to be ahead of the pack in spearheading a liberal approach to remote working, tech giant IBM was the object of a good deal of schadenfreude in



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May when it repealed and reversed its Mobility Initiative.

The supreme irony, lapped up by tech rivals and journalists, was that IBM continued to promote its mobility software and services – including Sametime instant messaging and voice products – and published research confirming the benefits for remote workers.

Clearly, a remote working arrangement does not live and die by the tools used to make it more frictionless, but simple practicalities can radically impact the efficacy of communication, time management, and even personal attitudes and relationships across teams.

At hedge fund software provider Tora, every employee has their own conference line, so that there's never a conflict or backlog of scheduled phone meetings, which are essential to coordinate between offices in Asia, the United States, Jersey and Romania.

Attention to detail has been paid even to seemingly mundane points of basic infrastructure, like the internal phone system, which is used across every office so that any employee in any location can be called internally with a four-digit extension number.

"It is a very simple thing, but fast communication is a really critical part of our work especially in the industry we are in," explains Oren Blonstein, Tora's COO calling from the Romania office. "Not having to go through a complicated set of processes to get somebody on the phone is one of the most fundamental things."

It's the fundamentals – the things that employees take for granted will be easy – which can trip up firms trying to implement remote working.

"Technical points are important, like fast, lag-free connection," says Collier. "In my view, there's nothing more irritating when trying to remote work than typing something and finding that there's a noticeable lag between what you are typing and what you are clicking on. It degrades productivity."

In the hedge fund sector, perhaps a point of difference compared to other sectors is that it's unusual for a new hire to be granted a remote arrangement. Trust is commonly cited as the most important prerequisite when evaluating the security and productivity risks of remote working, and there aren't enough grounds to reasonably trust a new hire about whom you have no direct knowledge or experience.

Anecdotally, all hedge funds who have adapted to flexible arrangement have done so in order to retain a valued employee, not to attract one.

Tina Kaul, headhunter and partner at quantitative recruitment agency EKA Finance, has seen first hand how the disparity between attitudes on the side of the candidate and the side of the company can be a bone of contention.

"A lot of candidates say that if companies were to allow remote working they would find that much more appealing than getting a higher salary," Kaul says. More than any other role, traders are categorically prohibited from working remotely or at home, even in cases of transportation strikes or weather emergencies. Kaul believes this has little



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to do with technical challenges and everything to do with a pervasive fear about cyber- and information-protection.

It doesn't take advanced tech or infrastructure to put in place impediments which would deter those accidentally or intentionally misusing information or access from a remote environment. A simple but effective control is to disable copy and paste of downloads in a local session.

A heavy-handed approach to remote working, the likes of which IBM has now committed to, is unlikely to be sustainable as financial firms compete with more agile and open sectors for talent. Nor is it conducive to a motivated and collaborative workforce.

Sten Tamkivi, who heads up the teleport team at global relocation and mobility management company MOVE

Guides, says that the budget, resources and energy put into mobility management needs to include increase opportunities for remote employees to travel, in addition to enhanced tools and security measures.

"Even while technologies such as video calling over internet and collaborative document editing have become commonplace, they are not perfect," he says. "For some jobs, removing the immediacy of communicating in the same room will probably hurt performance on both sides."

Trust – fundamental not only for remote workers but across all employees – can be built in person and maintained remotely, he argues, but not vice versa. Even the most engaging robot is not (yet) a good surrogate for the intangible features of workplace interaction. ■