



White paper

Remote Control

Working from a remote office

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Scoutwest, Inc.

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The era of distributed development has arrived. The offshoring craze combined with an increasing number of people who want to work at home has spawned a new breed of virtual development companies. Organizations are forced to consider these options when attracting talent. Some investment banks even refuse to fund technology startups that don't include, or strongly consider, offshore talent. Telecommuting is considered to be more productive, and resources are easier to attract when you have a worldwide talent pool.

Traditionally managers have been afraid of hiring remote development individuals or partners. The details of such an arrangement may be too unfamiliar to them, and may therefore seem impossible to try. They may never have seen telecommuting successfully modeled for them, and can't imagine a scenario where workers are not all together in a one cozy office freely sharing ideas and knowledge. It's the way it's always been done.

I've participated in the development of several products for some very high visibility companies while telecommuting. Therefore I've seen this modeled quite successfully, on several occasions. My thoughts regarding this aspect of development are summarized below.

Communications is clearly the biggest issue. The cozy office scenario offers the highest fidelity of communications, followed by video conferencing, telephone, and finally email and other written communication. Face time is the cozy office's biggest advantage, but what it gains in communications it partially loses in inefficiency and reduction of independent thinking. But the fact remains; good communication must be a high priority for remote development to succeed. I recommend regularly scheduled, mandatory meetings. I like regular weekly telephone meetings on Friday afternoons. This is the slowest work time, and it lets participants summarize the week's events, and prepare for the week to

come. Weekly status can be communicated during these meetings, and issues discussed. Participants can use the weekend as a natural break to mentally prepare to attack the week to come. Regularly scheduled face-to-face meetings are also necessary. These should be scheduled anywhere from once a week to once a quarter depending upon the travel costs involved. Telephone and email cannot replace face time.

Well-written documentation, such as requirements, design, development, and QA documents are more important. These make up for the numerous impromptu meetings at the office. This also encourages independent thinking because the authors must think for themselves while generating the documentation. Revisions are made as participants critique documents and offer refinements. Product plans should be fully thought through and documented before proceeding.

High-speed Internet connections are becoming necessary. While working remotely, it is becoming increasingly necessary to share large files, and to have access to a high-speed virtual private network. Email clients should be running at all times, and should be set to download email every few minutes. Instant messenger programs are also encouraged, for quick questions. All information systems should be set up to work identically from home and office, and desktop replacement laptops with docking stations are the machine of choice.

Project and issue tracking systems must be VPN or web-based. With the proliferation of high-speed VPN's, web-based applications are less efficient. Task management, status, issues, and tracking are usually micromanaged by project participants, while overall status is the responsibility of management. Remote workers must participate in tracking systems. Project issues must flow from one person to another seamlessly, regardless of location, and remote participants must maintain a rapid response time for all issues assigned to them. If these systems are in place and work well, remote development can be a perfectly viable alternative to the cozy office.

About Us

Scoutwest, Inc. develops and publishes project management and time tracking products for consulting, manufacturing, government, and general business applications.

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We specialize in packaged software for timesheets, project management, time tracking, defect tracking, and issue tracking. Standard Time is a web-based timesheet that also runs on Windows, Palm OS, and Pocket PC. It can be used for client billing and task management. Standard Issue is used for bug tracking and general issue tracking.

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