Exclusive Q&A With GitLab's Head Of Remote

Remote work "oracle" Darren Murph shares his secrets to success – and argues every organization with a digital output needs someone like him

Crowe is a pioneer when it comes to looking after staff and remote working. For example, in 2015, Crowe LLP introduced a mobility strategy designed to attract and retain the best talent.

The two key elements allowed employees to wear what they want and to work from wherever they want in the world – and many people certainly took advantage of the latter policy.

It may have been bold, but the prediction that greater staff autonomy boosts morale and productivity, thereby creating lasting value, was confirmed well before 2020.

Crowe has been leading the way in other areas, too. For instance, even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the organization had developed a mobile innovation lab for gathering and working through ideas.

The coronavirus crisis has accelerated the shift to remote working and, while Crowe has been well placed to adapt, other organizations have struggled. To help business leaders
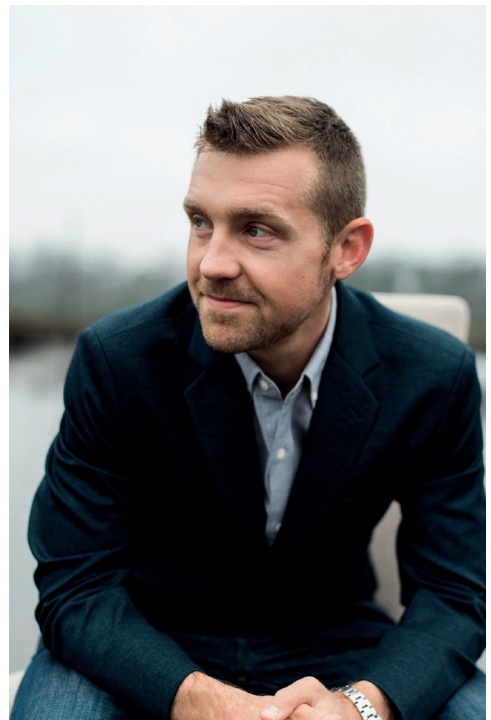
make smarter decisions, Darren Murph, the North Carolina-based Head of Remote at GitLab – a fully-remote technology company that has 1,300 employees spread across 67 countries – reveals his top tips and explains why all organizations with a digital output need someone like him.

Art of Smart: How did your appointment as GitLab's Head of Remote come about in July 2019?

Darren Murph (DM): GitLab recruited me. GitLab pioneered the notion of an all-remote company at scale – case studies have been written about its progressive organizational design – and they sought a leader to formalize their remote-work practices, improve onboarding and training, and ensure that team members acclimated well and became experts at remote-first workflows.

AoS: What skills do you think you need to have to be Head of Remote?

DM: You must be an extraordinary communicator, a visionary in organizational design, and skilled at change management/people nurturing. This is a senior role that requires organizational savvy and an ability to advise fellow executives on remote implications for every decision, keeping an eye on inclusivity and working to ensure a sense of belonging across the company. Here are 17 questions that this role answers.

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Remote work is, at its core, about inclusivity and flexibility."

Darren Murph
Head of Remote
GitLab

AoS: Given what has happened in 2020, and that GitLab has been fully remote for the best part of a decade, has your day-to-day role evolved at all, or not?

DM: My role has intensified dramatically due to the COVID-19 crisis. GitLab's vision is to open-source its knowledge of remote, which led to the publishing of The Remote Playbook in March 2020. Over 80,000 leaders have downloaded the guide, with transitioning organizations such as Coinbase and Dropbox leveraging its content to design their own remote journeys. I've advised dozens of top companies, including Facebook.

I've since collaborated with scholars and leaders all over the globe, participating in hundreds of consultations, webinars, panels, and podcasts. I worked with our learning and development team to launch How to Manage a Remote Team on Coursera, which has racked up over 10,000 students in just under two months.

CNBC recently cited me and Sid Sijbrandij, GitLab's Chief Executive, as the "oracles" of remote work.

AoS: And considering that the organization's distributed workforce spans 67 countries at the last count, how do you manage your working days?

DM: I lean heavily on GitLab and asynchronous workflows. Bias towards asynchronous communication is a sub-value at GitLab, thus I manage my work using GitLab (the product).

AoS: What does a typical working day look like for a Head of Remote at GitLab?

DM: I embrace and model a non-linear workday. No two days are alike. I reserve mornings for fitness and often take multi-hour breaks during daylight hours to spend time with family and handle mundane errands. I prefer to do most of my deep work late into my evening. GitLab's embrace of this model enables team members to work during their most productive hours as opposed to a rigid block.

AoS: What organizations do you think need a Head of Remote?

DM: Every organization with a digital output. The vast majority of companies will have some element of their organization impacted by the coronavirus-induced 'great remote migration', and failing to place intentionality on this sea change will ensure irrelevance when competing for top talent.

AoS: And how many other Heads of Remote have you come across?

DM: Very few. Most companies lack the expertise to even articulate the job description. GitLab pioneered this role, though I anticipate a massive surge in hiring for this role as companies realize the magnitude of change management required to get this right.

AoS: What top three tips would you give to help leaders better manage remote teams?

DM:

1. Approach your role as an unblocker, not a director.

2. Ask for feedback on what you can provide (tools, communications, benefits, etc.).

3. Embrace asynchronous workflows urgently; otherwise, expect Zoom fatigue and other burnout factors.

Viewpoints from Crowe

James Chappell, Global Business Director, Horwath HTL

"Ironically, many of the aspects of remote working have already been embraced in the hospitality consulting world. So much time is spent travelling that you learn to be adept at working on your own in unusual places. Airports, planes, strange hotel rooms, the back of taxis, cafés – all of these will be well known to consultants.

The challenge for hospitality consulting is that the work is typically unique and requires a much greater level of consideration before output is generated. We are by definition the solvers of complex problems, problems that typically have any number of potential solutions with often being no 'correct' answer, only a judgement call and choice to be made. As so much of the work is based on experience, learning is often on the job as opposed to tab A going into slot B. Paradoxically, many of the reports are pretty standardised, deliberately so, but the journey to that report is anything but. For this reason, consulting firms have been reluctant to move to a fully remote model as knowledge and expertise transfer is key and so hard to do remotely.

Whereas the pandemic has forced remote learning, consulting is one industry that cannot wait to get back into the office. It's no surprise to learn that communication is absolutely key and needs to be properly scheduled to compensate for proximity learning."