EPISODE 1034

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] JM: Remote engineering work makes some elements of software development harder and some elements easier. With Slack and email, communication becomes more clear-cut. Project management tools lay out the responsibilities and deliverables of each person. GitHub centralizes and defines the roles of developers. There's a lot of tooling to support remote teamwork.

On the other hand, remote work subtracts the role of nuanced conversation. There's no water cooler or break room. Work can become systematic and rigid and completely transactional. Your coworkers are your allies, but they feel less like friends when you don't see them every day. For some people, this can have a devastating long-term impact on the human psyche. Managers have the responsibility of ensuring the health and productivity of the people that work with them. Managing an all-remote team includes a different set of challenges than an in-person team.

Ryan Chartrand is the CEO of X-Team, a team of developers who work across the world and collaborate with each other remotely. X-Team partners with large companies who need additional development work. Ryan joins the show to talk about the dynamics of leading a large remote workforce as well as his own personal experiences working remotely. Also, full disclosure, X-Team as a sponsor of Software Engineering Daily, and I also want to mention that we are looking for show ideas. If you have a topic or a speaker that you're interested in hearing more about, send me an email, jeff@softwareengineeringdaily.com. We're always looking for new cool show ideas, and you can also tweet at us @Software_Daily. We'd love to hear from you.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:01:54] JM: Gauge and Taiko are open source testing tools by ThoughtWorks to reliably test modern web applications. Gauge is a test automation tool that makes it simple and easy to express tests in the language of your users. Gauge supports specifications in markdown, and

these reusable specifications simplify code, which makes refactoring easier and less code means less time spent maintaining that code.

Taiko is a node library to automate the browser. It creates highly readable and maintainable JavaScript tests. Taiko has a simple API. It has smart selectors and implicit weights that all work together to make browser automation reliable. Together, Gauge and Taiko reduce the pain and increase the reliability of test automation.

Gauge and Taiko are free to use. You can head to gauge.org to know more. That's G-A-U-G-E.ORG to learn about Gauge and Taiko, the open source test automation tools from ThoughtWorks.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:03:11] JM: Ryan Chartrand, welcome to Software Engineering Daily.

[00:03:14] RC: Hey! Awesome to be here.

[00:03:15] JM: I've been working remotely for almost 5 years and there are a lot of things that I enjoy about working remotely. But overtime, I've developed a sense that I've moved far away from human norms and I can go an entire week without interacting with many people in-person. In some ways, this is just great. I love interacting on the Internet. But when it comes to remote work, do you think there's anything fundamentally wrong about people working in such isolating physical conditions?

[00:03:49] RC: Yeah. I don't know that there's anything fundamentally wrong necessarily as so much as it is just not healthy. I think the goal really is about balance, right? Not to become hermits. You can see actually the extreme version of this happening in Japan right now. There are actually people who haven't left their houses in a decade, and there's half a million of them that's crazy, and things can easily head in that direction. We got Uber Eats, and I'm sure you're using things like Post Mates and Amazon Fresh and just Amazon for everything. It's very easy to never sort of have to leave your house, or like you said, have that human interaction. Thanks to, especially, remote work.

I think freedom is a beautiful thing, but it can also be a dangerous one, right? Because the irony is that once you've gained all of this unlimited freedom, you can work from anywhere. You can stay home. You're kind of more likely to trap yourself in sort of home dungeon so to speak. I like to say, you're essentially a blob that's going back and forth from your bathroom to your desk all day.

You would think that you'd be capitalizing on that freedom and living a more energizing and healthy life, but it can kind of go the opposite direction. But that's really where X-Team comes in. That's what our entire purpose as a company has been all about. It's what we've spent the last decade trying to solve because of how important that is. Our community is really designed to help motivate people to escape that home dungeon, to actually get out more, to walk more.

We actually do – Tomorrow, we do these Thursday events and there are always these big competitions, and we're doing one where you get 24 hours to rack up as many steps on your step tracker as possible and you form teams and all these stuff. We try to get people moving, getting them outside. We inspire people to do new things. We have this whole challenges system. We call it bounties, and they motivate you to sort of keep learning, exploring, getting out, growing, challenge is like maybe hike to the highest peak in your city or try out a new restaurant or go to an arcade you've never been to.

If you do one of those bounties, then you get rewarded with these collectibles that we've made; shirts and hats and super comfy work from home clothes, which are really cool. You could even donate to charities if you prefer, and we'll sponsor pretty much whatever you need to help you get out, to help you get up, whether that's a gym membership, movie tickets, maybe a weekend getaway the just give you that extra encouragement. Maybe a babysitter and a pet sitter if you need that, venture sports. I mean, we'll even help you sponsor your own event.

Let's say your excuse is, "Well, there's no one in my town that really fits my personality and my interests. I can't find a meet up group or whatever." We'll help you sponsor your own event and pull those people out of their home dungeons too. We try to make it so, basically, there is absolutely no excuse for someone to be lonely, to be isolated, to not feel energized. I also try to look at this as sort of a positive situation, because think about it, with an office, you're forced to

socialize with a very specific set of people, right? Every day, eight hours a day, same people at the water cooler, same people at lunch, indefinitely, and that's a lot of time you're spending with people that you may or may not get any value out of socially.

But with remote, you get to define who your people are. You actually get the define who you will spend your social time with. The office gave you that one group, but remote gives you the chance to find the right group. I think that's a huge opportunity. I see this all the time in X-Team. X-Teamers are going out to meet ups and they're having time to hang out with the people who really energize them the most, who understand them the most. They don't feel like they're just small talking with. They're really deeply connecting with and they end up actually with a far more diverse sort of group of human beings that they get to interact with every day because of that.

I think really the answer to your question is that there is nothing exactly wrong with living a life of minimal human interaction, but I think it's simply a matter of why not capitalize on the freedom that you have to escape your dungeon, to surround yourself with the people who energize you the most? I think anyone remote should be waking up each day with that goal in mind. Now how can I live isolated today, but how can I capitalize on today and surround myself with awesome people?

[00:08:02] JM: Those examples that you gave, doing meet up groups, that kind of thing, that is a nice salve for some of the loneliness we might have. Is there anything that we miss when we don't have this kind of daily routine interaction with a social group that is not – Well, I don't know. I suppose even the office does feel somewhat contrived or maybe a church group and maybe an athletic group. Maybe these things are all contrived. Maybe these are – I don't know. It's just something I'm trying to think through as I'm personally trying to institute more a natural sense of socialization in my life. Do you encourage people to do other things, like athletic groups? What are some other aspects of social adaptation you can encourage in the employee base that you work with?

[00:08:59] RC: I think contrived is a good word. You want to avoid the most contrived scenarios where you feel like you're being summoned to something that feels very too organized, right? We actually have another one of the challenges going on right now is to join a running group

and go on one of those sort of adventurous. It's a great way to actually explore your city or maybe a new city that you're going to. Certainly great for nomads as well.

It's trying to find the most natural form of socialization. To your point of what is the inherent benefit to it? It's an energy. We can talk more about that, but I think the biggest thing that you lose post-office life is that consistent energy, that consistent feeling that other human beings sort of emit when you're around them and working around them.

That energy you have to replace with something else. For some people, it's a lot of human interaction. For some, it's minimal. It's really a matter of you finding the right balance and finding the least contrived scenarios in your local community that allow you to get that energy back.

[00:10:07] JM: We did a show not too long ago with the CEO of GitLab, and that was an interesting show because it exemplified how remote teams function in a way that is starkly different from in-person teams. You're running a large remote organization as well. What are the most stark differences that you see in how a remote team functions differently from an office team?

[00:10:37] RC: Yeah, there's definitely a lot of differences. I am always reminded of them when I go to like a team meet up or a retreat and I realize the differences when the day ends and I realize how eight hours of constant face-to-face interaction and working is so exhausting. But certainly, remote teams, they're a different beast. They take all of the challenges of office teams and they just amplify them, right? Empathy, loneliness, poor documentation, all of those just become super amplified, and even bigger challenges for remote teams. But I think we all know this. We've heard that all before.

I think the main difference that I think we all need to be reminded of is actually the most beautiful thing about remote teams, and that's that at the end of the day all that matters in a remote team is the value that you add each day, because my biggest issue with working in an office team is that there're just so many other things you have to focus on. There're the people around you. There's the unnecessary socializing you have to do to gain favor with people.

There's being judged by how long you're seen at your desk. What do they call it? Butts in chairs, fingers on keys.

You have to worry about what time that you leave and making sure you're there long enough. You don't leave before Tim and you want to make sure you leave a little bit after him. There're people whispering about how long was Cindy at lunch? Who got the corner office? Who's getting walked out of the building? Human beings are way too complicated when you make them essentially lived together for eight hours a day, five days a week. But none of that matters in a remote team. That's what I love about it. There's no drama. There's no one judging how long you've been online. There's no corner office. There's none of the gossiping about your coworkers. All the matters and all that you have to focus on is showing up and adding value to your team each day all. All that matters is how much you help your team move forward each day. All that matters is how much the company moves forward each day. That's actually where our company tagline comes from; keep moving forward, because that's really the hearts of what I think makes remote team such a beautiful thing. All that matters and all you have to worry about is that forward progression.

Remote teams, they filter out all of the politics and the drama that you find more commonly in office teams and it's just more simple and clean and logical. Remote teams are rooted in sort of freedom and flexibility, and most importantly they're rooted in making sure that all that matters each day is that everyone's adding value and progressing the mission and the goals of the company. It's a beautiful thing, and inspires me actually to do the same with my life. How can I show up each day in my marriage, in my local community, in my personal goals? How can I add value to those things each day? When everything is sort of centered around adding value, I think both life and even running businesses becomes a lot more simple and efficient and effective. It's nice to be reminded of that.

[00:13:32] JM: On a more tactical level or on a more technological level, what are the differences in managing and all-remote team? Are there particular tools that you use? Are there particular practices you use that are necessities for remote team management that would not be true for an i-person office team?

[00:13:54] RC: Yeah. I think there's this misconception that remote teams must have all of these super complex and expensive tools in order to re-create the office experience or to be as effective as an office. In reality, we sort of use, if anything, less tools. We use the same big three. You can get really far with the big three; Zoom, Slack and the Google Suite. I mean, you can get really far in managing and operating a team.

Obviously, there're all sorts of other things you can add on top of that, but there's no really sort of secret tool that remote teams are using to be effective. It's really more about the processes, and that's where things get a bit more interesting because now you're introducing things like async communication, that communication method that you're not expecting immediate responses. With that comes all sorts of different etiquettes and style of working and different ways that you really have to put empathy at the center. I think that's one of the biggest differences between the office culture and the remote culture, is how much priority you have to put on empathy, because whether it's communication that you're having to do, the messages that you're sending. You're really having to make sure that you're focusing on empathy, because you can't see each other. You can't interact in-person. You have to be moving forward as a team.

We built a lot of our processes around empathy, around communication, around documentation, around sharing of information. These are the sorts of values that you see in remote teams that aren't as amplified in the office teams because there's sort of less of a sense of a need for it.

[00:15:37] JM: There are some companies that have the model of an in-person hub, and then they have several small offices or they have remote people scattered around the world working remotely. How would you contrast this model with the entirely remote model? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having that kind of hub and spoke model?

[00:16:02] RC: Yeah. The hub and spoke is interesting, and as it stands today, the way that most companies are doing the hub and spoke, it's more weighted on the disadvantages side. It's not to say that there aren't advantages. There are certainly some advantages. You can get things like cultural diversity. Let's say you have those hubs spread out all over the world. That's a good thing. It can mean leveraging time zones. That's a great way to use the hub and spoke. You can get that 24-hour working cycle and coverage, which is great for things like DevOps or

customer support. It's also effective if you're trying to break into local markets and having that local presence. That's been something that we try to take advantage of as well.

But most of the ways that businesses are managing the hub and spoke model, it really leads to more downsides, because to do it well, you need to be overly inclusive. You're distributing essentially tribes mixed with sort of mercenary type solo people around the world. You need a culture that's really good to be rooted in documentation and sharing information with all the teams, because it's very easy for the tribes and the offices to just sort of withhold information and take that that tribal mentality.

You also need office people sort of dialing into Zoom calls from their desks. That's a common one. Not having them try to do the conference room and everyone's trying to hear what the people in the office are saying. You need the language that you use to be very specific. You don't want to start calling the remote people the remote people, because they instantly feel disconnected and you start thinking of them is disconnected and you start thinking, "I don't need to share this information with them, because they're so distant and remote." The list goes on. You just create this laundry list of additional challenges that you get from, let's say, if you were all remote. You really need a good reason for having those offices. If you really need them, you need to really make sure that you're focusing in on all these little nuanced things that can make the communication and the trust and the connection between those teams work.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:18:16] JM: You probably do not enjoy searching for a job. Engineers don't like sacrificing their time to do phone screens, and we don't like doing whiteboard problems and working on tedious take home projects. Everyone knows the software hiring process is not perfect. But what's the alternative? Triplebyte is the alternative.

Triplebyte is a platform for finding a great software job faster. Triplebyte works with 400+ tech companies, including Dropbox, Adobe, Coursera and Cruise Automation. Triplebyte improves the hiring process by saving you time and fast-tracking you to final interviews. At triplebyte.com/ sedaily, you can start your process by taking a quiz, and after the quiz you get interviewed by Triplebyte if you pass that quiz. If you pass that interview, you make it straight to multiple onsite

interviews. If you take a job, you get an additional $1,000 signing bonus from Triplebyte because you use the link triplebyte.com/sedaily.

That $1,000 is nice, but you might be making much more since those multiple onsite interviews would put you in a great position to potentially get multiple offers, and then you could figure out what your salary actually should be. Triplebyte does not look at candidate's backgrounds, like resumes and where they've worked and where they went to school. Triplebyte only cares about whether someone can code. So I'm a huge fan of that aspect of their model. This means that they work with lots of people from nontraditional and unusual backgrounds.

To get started, just go to triplebyte.com/sedaily and take a quiz to get started. There's very little risk and you might find yourself in a great position getting multiple onsite interviews from just one quiz and a Triplebyte interview. Go to triplebyte.com/sedaily to try it out.

Thank you to Triplebyte.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:20:32] JM: There are some nuances to having an entirely remote team. I've talked to the GitLab CEO about this in some detail, and one example is the amount of text-based discourse. You have so many conversations that are overtaxed, and it can be hard to commute the subtlety of your intentions through text-based discourse compared to where you have vocal inflections.

I've noticed some different strategies for dealing with this. There are some people who communicate overtaxed in a way that completely lacks emotion and they just try to be impartial and methodical, and there are other people who try to have a supreme level of nuance and try to convey their emotion with more strength. Do you have any preferred approach for how to inject emotion into tech store? Any other nuanced approaches to having productive discourse in a remote team?

[00:21:43] RC: Well, I'm curious. I definitely have an answer, but what is your preferences as sort of the receiving end of those messages?

[00:21:51] JM: I can adapt to you either one. I'm kind of like – I just take the neural network approach of just waiting till you have enough sample data to really understand how this person interacts and they send you like reserve judgment until you've got maybe two or three or four days of interaction with them before you really start to feel like you have a barometer for how their interactions map – To how their text interaction is mapped to their actions in the workplace.

[00:22:23] RC: Yeah, totally. I think you're right. You have to – This is why it's important when people join remote teams to do a readme, and the readme sort of explains the way of working that they are. What kind of message style they expect to receive? All sorts of things that you can sort of write about yourself and the way that you work. People get that more quickly, which is good.

Definitely, I default to the nuance side. I'm all about sort of conveying emotion as much as possible. A great example I think that I like to use is take a word like sure, right? If you get a message that just says sure, compared to a message that says sure with a happy face next to it, they're two completely different messages.

[00:23:04] JM: Passive aggression.

[00:23:06] RC: Is it?

[00:23:07] JM: It might be.

[00:23:07] RC: I could mean you're a bit upset or annoyed or maybe you're burned out. I don't know. I don't know how you're feeling when you just write sure. But you add that one little emoji next to it, and suddenly I know how you're feeling. I know your spirits are high. I know you're being a team player and you're happy about the task I've assigned you. I feel good from imagining the smile on your face. There's just so much good that comes out of a single emoji and so much information that comes from that. why wouldn't we use emojis more?

I'm a big fan of using sort of as many emojis in a paragraph as it takes to make sure that messages are never misunderstood. I think emojis get a bad rap. I think a lot of people think it's too casual. It's too informal in a business setting, but it's one of the greatest advancements of

async communication and text messaging that we ever got. Why not capitalize on all of the value that it can bring you?

I also like tools like Loom. Not sure if you've used that for screen recordings. Anything that kind of lets you escalate a conversation to bit a video. The cool thing about Loom is you can have your face and the screen showing at the same time. Just escalating to a bit of video to help you better express how you're feeling about a topic. Maybe even you just don't want to type a lot. Sometimes that's nice, but it's a great way to sort escalate that added emotion without needing the full-on meeting. Never escalate to a full-on meeting unless you're really just not understanding each other through each other's messages. You're really not aligning or making a decision because you can't understand each other. That's when you escalate to a meeting, but it's nice that you can kind of take this. I'll start with emojis. I'll escalate to some video, some recorded video, and then we can escalate to a meeting if needed. Again, it goes back to empathy. It's so important to use the nuanced emotion, I think, in all of your communication, because whether it's tests or screen casts or meetings, just you have to help people understand where you're coming from, because you don't have that in-person interaction and social queues to pull from.

[00:25:10] JM: You're the CEO of X-Team. Explain what X-Team does in more detail.

[00:25:14] RC: X-Team is a fully remote company, which is awesome. We built these high-performing and on-demand teams of developers for companies, really, of all sizes, but we primarily work with big brands like Riot Games who builds League of Legends, Fox, Coinbase, Sony, Kaplan of the biggest education companies, Beachbody, Fair. I mean, all sorts of companies, and we essentially act as an extension of their engineering teams, which helps them scale more quickly.

We're actually able to build those teams by calling upon this incredible, and inspiring, and active, and energizing community which I talked about filled with developers from all over the world. More than 50 countries, and we've been building that community over the last decade, and it's just filled with these incredibly skilled and selfless and humble and highly-motivated people who want to drive their lives forward and they want to drive projects forward. They are always inspiring each other every day.

Since we put so much focus on giving them sort of energy and this rewarding experience, you can – Really, one of the most rewarding experiences you can have as a developer, and that allows us to build these teams of highly skilled people very easily and quickly for our partners.

[00:26:29] JM: You've been around since 2006. How has the company involved in that period of time? That's 14 years of evolution of remote work. What has changed in that period?

[00:26:43] RC: Yeah, it's interesting. X-Team was actually originally a Dev agency back in 2006, so a very successful one as well. We actually built the original frontend for Twitter as well as Threadless and all sort of startups from back in that era. We've also been working with, I mentioned, Fox. We've been working with them since the start over a decade ago, which is really cool. But I think the big shift that came in that history was when we decided to pivot to just focusing on building teams of developers. This was around the time that Agile was really starting to gain a lot of momentum. I'm sure as you know, it's very hard to make Agile work in sort of this piecemeal, project-based model. You got change requests every week. You got 100 SOW's you're having to deal with. You get the short-term contracts. Agile just doesn't really work for that sort of model, and especially if you want to scale rapidly and drive your projects forward.

We did this pretty early on when there are only a few competitors, plenty of them now. Plenty of copycats that show up every day, but we knew from the start the thing that was going to separate us and the key to it all was going to be the community, right? You can't build these teams rapidly without having a massive network of highly-skilled people and you don't get that massive network without a community that every developer wants to be a part of.

That's what we really reinvest everything into, and that's what separates us from our competitors, because that's not really their focus. For a decade now, we've really tried to just focus constantly on iterating, creating that most rewarding community for developers to be a part of and it's something that we continue to focus a lot of effort on, and that's really –If you look back on our last decade, that's what we've been just constantly iterating and growing upon.

[00:28:32] JM: What kinds of scalability challenges have you encountered in developing X-Team and growing it?

[00:28:39] RC: Yeah. I think people would assume the biggest challenges would be around growing that network, but that's probably been the most fun sort of challenge and also one of the easier ones because of the great community we've built. It's a lot of the little things you don't expect to get into that end up being the biggest headaches.

I'll give you a great example. Trying to figure out how to send, successfully send, packages to more than 50 countries, especially Russia or Turkey. It's insanely difficult. It actually took a package that we are sending with some X-Team T-shirts to a developer in Panama, it took them 10 months to get the package because the customs apparently like rated where the package was being held and they eventually gave it back 10 months later and it just showed up on an X-Teamer's doorstep. I mean, these aren't things that when you're starting a remote company you think you're going to have to worry about.

Another one that's hard to scale is things like retreats. No one ever tells you when you start a remote company that you're going to have to organize flying in hundreds of people around the world. No one tells you you're going to have to go through fire festival, right? Deftly, the bigger that these events get, the more challenges that they bring. But thankfully they're incredibly rewarding experiences. We put a lot of time into those scaling challenges.

This year we're actually trying to address the scaling issue, is doing a multi-location event all on the same weekend. A bunch of cities around the world all sort of celebrating and doing their own retreats together at the same time and making a remote experience part of that as well. No matter where you are in the world, you can take part in it and then try to be is inclusive as possible, because I think the more you scale, especially a community, especially a people-centered culture, the more difficult it becomes to be inclusive and make sure that everyone is getting value from it. I think that's been the most interesting areas to explore. How can we really push ourselves to be as inclusive as possible?

[00:30:36] JM: As far as the business scalability question, this is something I'm pretty curious about, because there's traditional perspectives around staffing kinds of businesses where you have companies and you have developers and you do your best to match them and get those companies staffed with great developers. There's perspectives that may be this is not a scalable

enough business model, but there are past examples that are extremely successful, like you could take Accenture, for example. It's not the most flashy example, but Accenture is a very successful company. It is a kind of staffing company. What's the formula for making a strong staffing business?

[00:31:22] RC: Yeah. I mean, this definitely isn't a market that is going to be dependent on technology. Anyone can build one of these, let's say, a marketplace or a platform that can sell Dev staffing. That's why you see a lot of copycats that will show up for six months and disappear. Anyone can do it. Competing on technology isn't really going to help you in this market.

You can compete on price. You mentioned Accenture, or Deloitte, these high-priced consulting companies. That's certainly something you can compete on, but I think the most important thing to compete on and make it successful is focusing on trust. Above all, what you need is trust to make this model work. Far more important than any – You mentioned matchmaking or AI algorithm that helps churn out the top one, whatever, percent of people these days. What you really need is trust, and trust doesn't come easy.

It's why oDesk failed and had to change their name. They built this reputation of come to oDesk and hire people you want to trust. Companies can't trust hiring remote people from a marketplace. They want something long-term. They want long-term teams, long-term relationships, and you only get long-term by having developers that you can retain. You only get developers to stick around by really being their fuel, being their support arm, being everything that they need, giving them everything they need to live that rewarding lifestyle that they're looking for.

That's the formula really for us. That's how you compete with something like an Accenture. That's how you create a successful business. You need to have the long-term levers in place that allow for trust, reliability, consistency, high-Dev retention, and all the technology that we've build has really been to just help support that retention piece. That's where technology actually comes in handy in a lot of ways.

[00:33:15] JM: I want to know more about the contrast between what you do with X-Team and what these contracting marketplaces do. I've worked a lot with Upwork in Fiverr and I'm fascinated by these marketplace businesses partially because the range of talent the you can hire from those places is so diverse. You can hire musicians, and artists, and virtual-reality designers, and product designers, and in 3D artists and all kinds of things.

But as you said, the long-term relationship, it's hard to foster a long-term relationship with somebody from one of these contracting websites. I'm not quite sure why that is, but my experiences is that when there is somebody else in the loop, when there is an overseer, like you have in the case of X-Team, there's more accountability. I'm not exactly sure why it is, but maybe you could break down your perspective for how these two hiring vectors compare to one another.

[00:34:22] RC: Yeah, it's interesting. If you've ever had to try like – If you've ever had to hire something like a designer, then you've been through that painstaking process of what happened? Where did they go? Why did they disappear? Why is this so hard to get them to stick around for longer than two weeks? That's just because there are certain trades and there are certain marketplaces out there that are just focused on sort of, "I need to get as many projects and volume as possible to make a living, because I'm not getting a full-time sort of pay somewhere."

That's the beauty of what X-Team resolves, is it makes that freelancer lifestyle a lot more predictable. They know that there's going to be work for them. They know it's going to be full-time work. They know that even if a project ends – Something that we do that none of our competitors do is we'll actually offer them a three-month runway to work with us on internal projects and we'll keep looking for a new team for them to join. That's something you don't really find. Again, it goes back to how people-centered we are. Anyone who's adding value to our company, we want to give that value back and keep them around and that kind of stuff.

It's really about stability. You can't expect reliability when they don't have stability. When they are jumping and juggling projects and having to deal with getting the payments and chasing down all the people who didn't pay them. I mean, they're taking on so much overhead and extra work that even if you're on Upwork and you have some of that taken care of, you still don't have

reliability and long-term effectiveness. That's what we give and allows these teams to really add as much value as they can. That's all they have to focus on every day, is just adding value to the teams that they're on. That's, again, what I said is the most beautiful thing about remote work, about remote teams and it only works when you put that stability piece in place.

[00:36:18] JM: The developers the you get for X-Team, what's the process for finding them and screening them and on-boarding them and integrating them with the organization?

[00:36:31] RC: Yeah. Finding them, it's really more about how to they find us. We have teams of recruiters that are going out there and doing all that kind of stuff, but we're also doing a lot of awareness campaigns and we're involved in a lot of the right local communities all over the world. We're doing a lot of good sponsorships for collaborating with a lot of great influencers. We're trying to be thought leaders on our blog and on social media. All the big marketing engine stuff that you need is there.

But more often what happens is that they find us before we find them. I think it's because X-Team is so unique, because the experience and the value and the excitement of our brand and our community, it's very unique. It's something that's hard to put into words, which is what people who join often say and it resonates very well. That word-of-mouth really spreads quite rapidly.

We're really grateful to get to meet so many awesome developers from all of the world every day. To your question of how do you integrate them? Obviously, we have a whole on-boarding process and a lot of different things that help them become a part of the community as quickly as possible but also start living the X-Team lifestyle as quickly as possible and becoming a part of something bigger than themselves. I think that's the other piece on top of stability, that you see more commitment out of people when they feel part of something bigger, and you don't really get that in a marketplace. You don't feel part of something bigger. You feel very isolated and you're just on your own. Here, you really feel like you're coming into something that feels like belonging, feels like you were meant to sort of be there because you have this sort of warm welcome that happens that really drives you forward.

[00:38:12] JM: When you're interacting with companies, so companies come in. Maybe it's like Fox, or Coinbase. They come in, they need developer help. What's the process of integrating with those companies and on-boarding the developer into those companies?

[00:38:29] RC: Yeah. Usually, you would think it would be a lot more complex. For some companies, it is. Obviously, if you have a lot of security issues and you need to send out laptops, specifically company laptops and things like that, there's obviously – Each company has their own sort of access levels and concerns and all of that, or working with a smaller company. You're working on day one, which is great. It really varies depending on each company. But it's usually pretty smooth process, and really the biggest thing that we come in with and direct all X-Teamers on is your goal on day one is to add immediate value, and hopefully you saw that as well from your experience. I it's really about if we're going to onboard, our goal from day one is to just get in there, add value and keep adding value every single day after that. That's the most important piece. Even if we don't have a laptop yet, let's say the company needs to send us a laptop, we're still trying to find ways to add value regardless. Maybe we can start reading some docs. Maybe we can start updating those docs. Maybe we can – Whatever it is, how can you add value? That's really what our ramp up period is all about.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:39:47] JM: Over the last few months, I've started hearing about Retool. Every business needs internal tools, but if we're being honest, I don't know of many engineers who really enjoy building internal tools. It can be hard to get engineering resources to build back-office applications and it's definitely hard to get engineers excited about maintaining those back-office applications. Companies like a Doordash, and Brex, and Amazon use Retool to build custom internal tools faster.

The idea is that internal tools mostly look the same. They're made out of tables, and dropdowns, and buttons, and text inputs. Retool gives you a drag-and-drop interface so engineers can build these internal UIs in hours, not days, and they can spend more time building features that customers will see. Retool connects to any database and API. For example, if you are pulling data from Postgres, you just write a SQL query. You drag a table on to the canvas.

If you want to try out Retool, you can go to retool.com/sedaily. That's R-E-T-O-O-L.com/sedaily, and you can even host Retool on-premise if you want to keep it ultra-secure. I've heard a lot of good things about Retool from engineers who I respect. So check it out at retool.com/sedaily.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:41:23] JM: I'm also curious just about the internal organization of X-Team and how you've grown the management team. How many levels to the org chart there are and just general tips you have for scaling a remote organization? Tell me about some of the procedural things that you do to grow the workforce and to make sure that the proper management strictures and culture remains in place.

[00:41:56] RC: I think like any company, and even more so in a remote setting, the initial sort of gut feeling is to make it as flat as possible, and that lasts a long time. Eventually, you are going to need some structure. Although our org chart is still pretty flat, there is definitely structure to it. There's still middle management and all that kind of stuff. But the big difference with the remote teams is that, again, it goes back to trust. The biggest difference that I see is that we're not – We're trying to start with trust. Give us a reason not to trust to is sort of more of the path to take as supposed to the more office culture of I need to, again, see butts in chairs and fingers on keys. We don't trust you. We're going to lock the snacks cabinet and you have to come get a key to open it. That kind of approach of we don't really trust you and that's why we're putting as much management sort of levels in layers in places possible to keep you accountable.

In a remote team, because trust is so important, because we can't see each other, because we're, again, focused on just adding value every day, and that's all that matters. You do tend to have less management tiers and all of that because there's so much more trust in place. That said, you're still going to need some sort of level of it to keep accountability going and to make sure that all the teams are moving forward and you just have to have some levels of it, but you're going to find a lot more trust- giving in a remote team because you simply have to have it to succeed.

[00:43:32] JM: Do you think that this experience we're having now with the coronavirus and causing everybody to work remotely, do you think this is going to set a new baseline for how much remote work is done?

[00:43:51] RC: Yeah, this is a very timely time to be talking about remote work, and I think there are two ways I see this going. It can either be a big step forward for remote work or it's going to actually be a big step backward. I think most people are thinking right out it's going to be the big step forward, right? This is finally going to show companies and managers that, "Hey, look. Remote work is great." Hey, look. In March, we had way more velocity on our projects because we're working from home and I didn't have to commute four hours in San Francisco."

The expectation everyone has right now is that this is it. We're finally here. This is going to unlock the future of remote, but it could also go the other way. It could be a huge step back, because think about it. You have a lot of companies being forced to do something that they have no idea how to do, that they are not ready for, that they haven't even considered, that they haven't trained people how to build trust, how to actively communicate, how to stay energized at home. I'm seeing tweets of people saying they can't stop snacking now that they have to work from home and they're afraid of getting fat. There are other people saying I can't start my day because I'm used to taking a drive or other people saying I can't focus because the kids are in the other room. These are all challenges with very simple solutions. But no company was prepared for these challenges. There is that potential for a lot of negative backlash. A lot of people coming back to the office in April, May, let's say, and saying, "Well, glad that's over with. We can finally get back to work." that's what I'm afraid of.

If companies are actually less productive because they don't know what they're doing, that could be a step back. We saw this happen with oDesk 5 to 10 years ago, or Upwork as it's called now. But the remote work reputation was really scarred by oDesk. It was something – It was a reputation of, "Well, remote work is for low-skilled people, low English abilities, poor quality work." That's what you're going to get from hiring remote.

We've had to spend the last 5 to 7 years changing the remote reputation and showing that you can actually bring premium quality people from all over the world and build great remote teams. What we're seeing right now, it's starting off very positive and I really truly hope it stays that way.

I hope a lot of people get freed from the chains of their offices and that a lot of companies start coming our way for help. That'd be great.

Another thing I'm worried about that I don't think anyone is thinking about is – I'm already starting to see it on LinkedIn. We're going to see the new age version of social media gurus popping up. Now we've got the remote work gurus who are just spreading bad advice. If companies are following the bad advice, that's not helping us take a step forward. I'm hoping the remote work community, like myself, we're trying to put a lot of good thought leadership out there into the social world now to help steer people in the right direction. Again, I'm excited about what's happening. I'm excited the timeline of remote work is speeding up hopefully, and it's all very exciting, and it's mostly positive so far. I hope it stays that way.

[00:46:49] JM: But what's the bad a device that is coming from the remote work gurus?

[00:46:54] RC: Oh! I'll give you a great example. We're seeing a lot of interesting tools suddenly emerge that are trying to make the remote work experience as much like an office as possible. Probably the most terrifying feature I saw was the ability to instantly call someone and the other line instantly picks up. The point is to try to recreate walking over to someone's desk and bothering them essentially. I mean, these sorts of things there are scaring me. If that becomes the norm, no one's going to want to work remote because we're not trying to recreate the office experience in every way possible.

[00:47:35] JM: Yeah, that's kind of one thing I've really appreciated about working remotely, is that I can have that dedicated isolation time and not kind of have a just programmatic way of not being tapped on the shoulder or interrupted. Assuming that the culture does move more heavily in the direction of remote work, how do you think the rest of the culture will change as remote work becomes more commonplace?

[00:48:04] RC: The rest of which culture specifically?

[00:48:07] JM: The world. I mean, if you get more like data-entry jobs becoming remote work as well as perhaps a majority of developer jobs or half or a large minority.

[00:48:18] RC: Yeah. The world will change in a lot of good ways and a lot of challenging ways, and these are things that we've seen. These are things that we've seen evolving over the last decade. The good things are people become a lot more empowered. They spend more time with their families. They're more energized. They're more happy. A lot of good things come from that and you actually end up – A cool example is actually the local impact that I'm seeing among X-Teamers. They are they spend a lot more time finding ways to add value to their local community because they have the freedom to finally do so. They're giving talks. They're giving workshops. They're helping all of the people that are less fortunate in their community to learn how to code and grow their careers, and it inspires me.

Just the other day, I found a bunch of oranges and help donate them to the local shelter just because it makes you want to do something with the time and the flexibility that you have. A lot of good things are going to come from it when you have the global workforce empowered like that.

Obviously there're the downsides, and we talked about them already. Things like isolation. Things like needing to solve a lot of the focus challenges that actually come from – Let's say your family works with you at home. There are a lot of challenges that will need to be figured out and it's going to take – It's taken us a decade to figure them out. So it's going to take another decade for everyone else to jump on board with us. Absolutely, I think for the most part, it's going to be primarily a lot of positive things so long as companies are focused on solving the isolation issue for their people. I don't know if you want to go into the isolation question you had right there maybe?

[00:49:58] JM: Well, sure. I mean, the isolation question to me is one of the most fundamental issues with remote work. I mean, for me it's been sort of a slow burn. As time has gone on, I've just increasingly become aware of how problematic the isolation can be, because there's a sense in which I feel like I'm – I don't want to say addicted to my work, but it's just so easy. It's just so easy to kind of sit at home in front of your computer and do knowledge work for somebody who really likes to read, who really likes to write, who really likes to do creative work. There's no pressure from the economic world, from the outside world. I don't have my parents calling me and telling me to go and join a running group or to go to church or something like or to go to school, to go to an office. I just sort of sit here for years and years, and like I'm active. I

get outside and I go to the gym and stuff, but there's definitely a deficiency, and this to me seems like pretty difficult because it's a very slow chronic burn. Have you endured that? Have you kind of gone through that set of issues yourself?

[00:51:13] RC: Absolutely, especially when you're single. It is amplified significantly. I'm not sure. Are you single?

[00:51:19] JM: I'm not. Yes, I've gone through both – I mean, they both have their issues. But yeah, I would say yes. Definitely, it's even worse when you're completely isolated.

[00:51:33] RC: Exactly. I've lived them all. I've done the single life. I've done the married life. I've done the traveling around the world, nomad, while married life. I've done the living in a home life, which is what I'm doing now. I've experienced them all. I totally agree that you can get addicted to work that happens regardless of where you are in the world. I think the most depressing version is when you are a nomad or traveling trying to capitalize on your freedom to travel and you're sitting in your Airbnb in London, let's say, and you can't pull the laptop away.

Here is all of these great freedom that you have to go explore a new city and take advantage of this amazing opportunity that everyone's sitting in an office back at home wishes they could do, and you're you're glued to your laptop and you can't turn it off because you need more dopamine hits. That's the unfortunate part. Like you said, there's no one telling you to stop.

I think there's a shared responsibility involved here. I think there's our responsibility as companies to give a huge amount of support and funding to our teams to make it so that they have absolutely no excuse to isolate themselves. To make it so they have no excuse to be living in a dungeon essentially. I think that's our side of the responsibility, endless support, whatever it takes to help them. But it's a shared responsibility, because like you said, there's no one there necessarily telling you.

If that's not there, let's say it is there. In our case, we put a lot of that support there, but ultimately they need to be the one who takes the step out the door. They need to be the one who actually signs up for that co-working membership that will pay for, or signs up to go to that

meet up that will pay for, or go on a date will even pay for that, or go on a weekend getaway will pay for that too.

Ultimately, though it's on them to do something with that support, to take action. The worst – This is where it gets so challenging because loneliness, once it grabs hold of you, the last thing you want to do is take action. You go into the depressed state. You don't want to do anything. This is the thing that I fear the most when you talked about the global culture. What's the impact going to be?

If you don't have that community in your life that is supporting you and encouraging you to take the action, you're just going to get gripped to where you will never want to take action and you're that guy in London, like I was probably at some point, glued to the computer. Thankfully, no X-Teamer has reached that point that I'm aware of because we create those opportunities. We create videos that inspire. We create events and energy that we put into their lives and we give them the funding and the encouragement and we even do one-on-one chats anytime they want. It all adds up to a lot of motivation that encourages you to take that action. I think we need every single company that offers remote to be doing the same.

[00:54:25] JM: Well put. What's the long-term vision for X-Team? How does the company look in the limit?

[00:54:31] RC: The vision really, it's sort of twofold, right? We've got the developer side and the company side. The developer side of the vision came from sort of what I just talked about, that living the remote lifestyle for the last decade. Like I said, I've lived every version of it, and there's sort of nothing worse than the default remote lifestyle. If you don't tweak anything, it can be very de-energizing, and I think that's the one thing that the offices have over us, is that they have that consistent sort of energy that you get when you go into them.

What all of the lifestyles that you find in remote right now, they all lack that consistent feeling of energy. You don't want to be part of a lifestyle where you're not learning, you're not growing, you're not exploring, you're not taking care of your health, you're not capitalizing on the freedom you have all because that energy isn't there.

The vision on the developer side is really about creating this lifestyle that is a subset of the remote lifestyle, that's a tweak on the remote lifestyle, and it's a lifestyle that's rooted in the living active, living energized, and we've really centered our community around this. It's been really inspiring to watch. I literally wake up every day. Just today I woke up to tons of messages of X-Teamers reporting in on all the ways that they're learning and exploring and growing and staying active and staying fit and eating healthy, being awesome parents, doing great things in their community like I talked about, or mentoring people. I mean, it's very inspiring when you see all that positive energy coming out and it makes you want to live the same. It makes you want to sort of squeeze as much value and life out of each day that you can. That's the vision for our developer side, to create that lifestyle and keep making it better and better and not sort of just being content with the default remote lifestyle that is out there today. That's the vision for the developer.

For the business side, it plays right into it, because then the goal is to give companies teams of people that live that lifestyle, who live active, who live energized, who live to drive themselves and their projects forward. You get these companies ending up with these super energized forward-moving teams because they have all of the right sort of culture and energy behind them and they have that excitement of being part of something bigger than themselves like I talked about. I think remote work gets criticized too much for being, like we talked about, isolating, low-energy, hard to shut off work, and we're trying to show the world that it can be far, far more rewarding than that.

[00:57:02] JM: Ryan, takes for coming on the show. It's been great talking to you.

[00:57:05] RC: It's been awesome. Thanks so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:57:15] JM: As a company grows, the software infrastructure becomes a large complex distributed system. Without standardized applications or security policies, it can become difficult to oversee all the vulnerabilities that might exist across all of your physical machines, virtual machines, containers and cloud services. ExtraHop is a cloud-native security company that detects threats across your hybrid infrastructure. ExtraHop has vulnerability detection running

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