

How Will You See My Greatness if You Can't See Me?

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ABSTRACT

Newly hired employees go through a ramp-up period of acclimating to their organization. This period, known as onboarding, is often stressful and challenging for both the new hires and their managers. In globally distributed software development teams, the onboarding process may also be distributed; new hires may be in completely different locations than their managers and teammates. We are conducting a qualitative study of new hires who work remotely from their software development teams. Our data indicate that these new hires are impacted by their struggle to get noticed by their managers and teams during their first few weeks on the job. In this poster, we offer evidence that remote new hires are frustrated by their diminished opportunities to demonstrate proficiency to their managers and are unable to observe some important kinds of great work by their teammates.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.9 [Software Engineering]: Management

General Terms

Management

Keywords

software development, distributed work, newcomer socialization, computer-mediated communication

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of globally distributed software development has exacerbated problems associated with socializing newcomers into an organization. According to a popular theory by Van Maanen and Schein[4], newcomers must learn their functional tasks (how to do their job), the hierarchy (the org chart), and their social network (who they meet and work with to get their jobs done). Other studies, which built on

Van Maanen and Schein's original theory, found that socialization tactics can influence newcomer adjustment [3, 7]. In the new Microsoft Canada Development Centre (MCDC) in Richmond, British Columbia, new developers and testers are working remotely from their managers and the rest of their teams who are located in the same time zone in Redmond, Washington, USA, about 120 miles away. Their remoteness, both physical and social, aggravates the issues already found in distributed development such as conflict caused by a lack of shared identity and context [2], lack of awareness of teammates' activities and difficulty with work coordination and consensus-building [1], and readiness to use collaboration technology [5]. The data we report here describes a specific set of problems of not seeing or being seen – observing and demonstrating great work. New hires are excited to be working at such a large company and are anxious to start completing tasks and to prove themselves. Engagement in social practices helps employees demonstrate their knowledge [6]. New hires at MCDC have trouble seeing and being seen by their teammates and managers because they are remote, and available collaborative technologies are problematic. These problems frustrate new hires and their managers and may ultimately impact remote employees' career growth.

2. METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

We are conducting a qualitative study of four software engineering teams from a variety of divisions at Microsoft who recently hired a remote team member. We conducted initial one-hour long interviews with each manager, mentor, and new hire and shorter follow up interviews weekly with each participant. We also spent 10 hours observing new hires at their offices during their first month of work. All the new hires in our study are men who have citizenship in Eastern Europe or the Middle East and do not yet have permission to work in the USA; they have between 0 and 7 years of software development experience. All four managers and their teams work in Redmond, Washington, and all four new hires work in Richmond, British Columbia. Only one team in our study had more than one remote team member; all other team members work in Redmond in offices on the same hallway.

3. FINDINGS

The problems we found for new hires come not from being able to complete their day-to-day work, but in demonstrating additional proficiencies and observing what it takes to become an excellent team member. New hires have been

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able to be productive in their new jobs despite their remoteness. They are fixing bugs, writing unit tests, and making satisfactory progress, according to their managers and mentors. They are able to participate in most team meetings using video conferencing. They rely heavily on email and instant messaging to interact with their Redmond teammates. Our study participants were eager to be perceived as productive team members, especially during their first two weeks of work. However, they were frustrated by the length of time it took to be assigned tasks and participate in team meetings. Their managers described their new hires as “chomping at the bit” and worried about new hires becoming bored because they could not yet work on engineering tasks.

New hires are anxious to demonstrate their proficiencies but run into difficulties getting started.

Some aspects of their first two weeks were unique to their location and situation as new immigrants to Canada: securing housing, setting up development and test computers, waiting for access to the corporate network, and waiting for their phones to be installed. For example, one new hire asked, “How much time will this take?” while waiting to get started on his “real work.” Managers were also surprised by how long these initial steps took. We observed that new developers tended to underestimate the time it would take them to complete tasks and tended to worry that they were falling behind or taking too long. As one manager put it, “He’s junior, right, so I guarantee his estimate won’t be more than 2 working weeks. He’ll think he can boil the ocean.” For remote new hires, the frustrations of not being able to talk to their managers or to see what their teammates are doing exacerbated their senses of being behind and unnoticed. Our new hires commented that it was frustrating for them that their Redmond teammates were not careful to schedule meetings in rooms equipped with video conferencing equipment, unintentionally leaving them out of those conversations. Each week, our participants report technical audio/visual problems, but even when these work as designed, new hires say they are unable to hear all parts of a conversation.

New hires cannot observe great work by their teammates.

Excellence, as defined by the managers, requires that an employee go above and beyond his regular duties. An employee may notice a problem in a software application, develop a new prototype, and show it to his team for feedback. He may “drive a component from (*sic*) end to end” by pulling in required people in the component development process, meeting with others about the component, and holding presentations about it. These types of activities are difficult for remote new hires to witness, to learn about, and to conduct. Managers commented that ideas for this kind of excellent work is sometimes mentioned in the team’s hallway or discussed amongst people who share an office. Remote new hires cannot see the team’s hallway activity, and they share work space with other remote employees on different teams.

Daily interaction may help alleviate problems from going unnoticed and not being able to see others’ work.

Managers indicated that they rely on email to communicate about work tasks with their employees, regardless of where employees are located. One team uses the Scrum process and a web-based application to keep track of tasks and their owners. Another team uses an Excel spreadsheet owned and shared by its manager. The activities that managers expect from excellent employees lay outside these normal channels. The systems in use do not capture information about work on new components or prototypes for tasks outside the team’s list. This work often lies under the radar until it has been completed. Because remote new hires are not able to see or participate in hallway and lunch discussions where many of these ideas are first mentioned, they are unable to observe this kind of “great” work. The remote new hire on the Scrum team sees more of his teammates work than do the other new hires because his team has a daily standup meeting and includes him via A/V conferencing. The Scrum team’s manager said, “I’m just so happy that [our daily meeting] is happening. [The] every day thing really helps. I feel the benefits.”

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We found evidence of specific problems for managers to observe and new hires to demonstrate excellence in globally distributed software teams. We also found that new hires are not able to observe the great work of their teammates, and they grow anxious because they are afraid they are behind or too slow. Future research will further describe the experiences of remote employees and will explore technical and organizational remedies for the problems they face during onboarding. We will explore questions of whether daily interaction alleviates these problems, how communication technologies impact onboarding, and what other unique challenges remote new employees face.

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