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Why Distributed Software Development Teams Work Infinitely Better



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It's a hot topic in the industry right now: are distributed software development teams as efficient and effective as those that are colocated? While many in the software development field believe teams that work together far outpace and outwork those distributed, I adamantly disagree. I'm a huge advocate for distributed teams, and here's why.

First, let's agree on what exactly "distributed software development" means. To me, it refers to planning, designing, building, testing, implementing, and managing software with different co-functioning teams located across various physical workspaces. This is quite different from "working remote," and I think it's important to note the difference.

Remote teams have one central headquarters location that makes all the decisions and defines processes that each worker follows. Distributed teams are less hierarchical in their construction. I love how Dropbox sums it up [on their company blog](#): “Remote work is a discipline for the individual worker, but distributed work is a discipline for the entire organization. From a distributed work perspective, a company is just a collection of resources aligned on a common mission.”

Traditionally, software dev teams have shared a workspace to increase collaboration which would lead to getting more work finished and hitting more deadlines. But in recent years—and even more specifically with Covid-19—it’s become quite clear how distributed teams are the way to go.

A big reason tech executives are wary of distributed teams is because it goes directly against some of the core principles of agile development, specifically that face-to-face communication is best. But recent advancements in video technology makes this objection practically obsolete. Adherence to the remaining agile principles and the addition of deliberate and intentional communication via video can result in even better development results.

Three of the most important benefits of distributed software dev teams are people, money, and work output. Let’s start with people. Gone are the days where you need to find the right person for a role in the same geographic location. Silicon Valley and Austin, TX no longer have a hold on all the top engineers, and it’s time to find the right person for the role no matter where he/she lives.

Hiring people with diverse backgrounds has myriad benefits for your team: reduced salary costs and much more diverse perspectives on problems. In fact, a [research company in the U.K.](#) found that diverse teams are 60% better at decision-making, and diverse companies are 35% more likely to have profits above their competitors.

Many (if not most!) top tech organizations are utilizing workers from international tech hubs like India, Ukraine and Brazil. This isn’t a new practice, but more and more businesses are starting to use their learnings and going fully distributed.

The second reason is money. There are significant savings with distributed teams. With reduced or no office space, companies save money on rent and office-related

expenses like utilities, parking, and other maintenance items. Travel costs also go way down with less focus on face-to-face meetings. And while you can't measure mental health in dollar bills, it's important to remember that not only is work distributed in this model, so is the stress. This means your employees will experience better mental well-being overall which is priceless in 2021.

Lastly, higher quality work is the third big benefit of distributed dev teams. A recent [MIT Sloan Management study](#) found, "Dispersed teams can actually outperform groups that are colocated. To succeed, however, virtual collaboration must be managed in specific ways." Be sure to pay attention: these might be the most important two sentences in this article. I'll repeat: dispersed teams outperform colocated teams and collaboration is key.

No distributed software development teams are successful without several things in play. Here are five critical strategies to employ:

- 1. Create regular and consistent meaningful virtual interactions.** Constant and clear communication is a must with distributed teams. Managers and leaders need to schedule regular team meetings as well as 1:1s with individual team members. It's easy to skip a regular 1:1, but in this work environment, they're crucial to success. Make sure all project kickoff calls are face-to-face video.
- 2. Keep everyone up to speed on agile practices.** One of the most effective ways to keep distributed teams on target is to have a dedicated coach. This role is focused on keeping each team member in their lane and working towards the same goal, no matter how many times it may change.
- 3. Have the team create a social contract.** A good distributed development team will create a contract that outlines how members will behave, make decisions, communicate, and essentially, work together. Having this in place will alleviate any information hoarding and petty gossip and eliminate the grapevine.
- 4. Adopt face-to-face video onboarding and training.** Putting faces to names from day one will help build the foundation for a great new addition to the team. A warm team welcome combined with clear onboarding documents and team contact information is the best way to add new players to the team.

- 5. Use the best tools to collaborate and measure/manage distributed development.** Truly successful distributed teams rely on collaboration software. A fully equipped team employs a solid messaging tool, an Agile tracker, and a video communication platform.

With more tech companies seeing the benefits of distributed software development teams along with the repercussions of the pandemic, it's clear where our industry is headed. I predict that the companies that understand and adopt this method early and consistently will top their competition.



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Boris Kontsevoi is a founder and President of Intetics Inc., a leading global software engineering and digital transformation company. Under his leadership, a group of software engineers developed into a truly global technology company with multiple professional certifications and industry awards, including the Global Outsourcing 100, Software 500, and Global Sourcing Association best of class company.

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