

## Contextualized Reading Report of:

**Jason Fried & David Heinemeier Hansson, *Remote: Office Not Required* (London: Vermillion, 2013), ISBN 9780091 954673, € 15,95.**

*Introduction*

Remote working has been hotly debated during the last decade. Several international companies embraced it enthusiastically but then dismantled their remote working program. As there are growing doubts about the blessings of remote working, the authors extol its advantages once again, without closing their eyes to its drawbacks. I made a reading report, reordering topics, omitting issues that are not immediately relevant within SIL contexts, and highlighting issues I deem relevant.

*Advantages of remote working*

In the first section of the book the authors give a pessimistic evaluation of office life as an “interruption factory.” Chats and meetings chop the day into tiny bits that make it difficult to get meaningful work done. Commuting also takes valuable time away, besides being bad for your health.

Remote work allows one to work outside the 9 – 5 frame and in different locations, not necessarily city offices. You can even work in your favourite country cottage. Online access to relevant sources is all you need. Adequate technology facilitating remote work is developing rapidly, for example Skype, Dropbox, Basecamp, WebEx, broadband Internet (the last chapter provides a list of these).

Meetings are often considered essential for synergy but often there are too many of them. Remote work has the effect of decreasing their frequency. As a result, meetings become more like a treat that is more effective, while day-to-day stuff can be resolved by Skype or chats sessions.

Working in different time zones is often a corollary of remote work. It has its challenges, but at the same time it allows for several hours a day without interruption to get creative work done. Obviously, some hours of overlap are essential. The advent of videoconferencing and screen sharing has the potential of making remote work less solitary. One could also think of a shared calendar or an in-company chatbox.

On the employer side, remote work “is about getting access to the best people wherever they are.” At the same time, it saves office rent and commuting costs. Employers do not always realize the part of the work is already being done remotely. Examples are outsourcing, posting of workers, or writing emails to a colleague next-door in the same office. Employers need a good deal of trust in remote workers, and should let

go of their tendency to control everything. But “the bottom line is that you shouldn’t hire people you don’t trust, or work for bosses who don’t trust you” (50). To counter the problem of distractions at home such as kids, YouTube, laundry or the newspaper, it is essential to keep the work fulfilling and interesting. Distractions encroach upon us when we experience our work as pointless.

To instill a sense of company cohesion and to share forward motion, everyone needs to feel that they are in the loop. The work that is done becomes more important than whether someone arrives late or leaves early.

### *How to deal with challenges for remote workers*

Remote work often involves long hours behind a computer screen. The *solitude* that comes along with this can be dealt with by consciously creating opportunities for social interaction outside work, such as family, a sports club or a co-working facility.

Another issue is *physical well-being*. For remote workers no less than office personnel, appropriate ergonomic equipment is very important. The company should advise and fund some of this obviously expensive stuff. It’s a fact that remote workers do less exercise. It requires discipline to take a pause and go jogging in the park, but it can be done in the time you save by not commuting. Some employers sponsor a health club membership for their remote workers.

Remote work can become *disconnected to the stakeholders*. Clients should know that you are working remotely. Because of this very fact, it is essential to show them work often, so that they see what you are producing, and to be very available. They should always be welcome to Skype us and emails should be answered immediately. All this can help to make clients realize that it’s their project you’re working on.

A feeling of *disconnectedness to the rest of the workforce* is a likely side effect of remote work. How can the remote working community thrive? If anything, the human connection is even more important when hiring remote workers because it has to be stronger to survive the distance. With the bulk of your communication happening via email and the like, it doesn’t take much for bad blood to develop unless everyone is making their best efforts to the contrary.

Cultivating a remote working community requires special attention from managers. Managing remote workers is not like managing chairs, as happens too often in offices. It’s important that remote workers get together every now and then. It is easier to work remotely with people you’ve met in real-life. Meetings are also important as a way to introduce new people to the rest of the team. To give a manager a feel for what remote working is like, he could do a week of remote work himself once in a while. One-to-one contact with remote workers makes all the difference to them. For managers, it’s a good

idea to check in a bit more frequently with remote workers, since they will bump into people in the office as a matter of course anyway. The goal is just to keep a consistent, open line of communication. These quick calls prevent issues and concerns from piling up without being addressed. Waiting six months or a year for the next formal review is too long. Formal annual reviews are usually too big-picture to pick up of the small things. Formal reviews cover such things as long-range goals, salary adjustments, possible promotions etc., but the real dangers are the small things – the concerns that creep up between annual check-ins.

Remote workers should be *empowered* to make decisions on their own. A working atmosphere where remote workers hesitate to take responsibility because of environment of retribution and blame is incompatible with remote work. By default, people should have access to everything they need. Some companies get their remote workers credit cards and tell them “to spend it wisely.”

To *stay motivated*, one should review regularly if the work is still clearly defined and fulfilling. An occasional month-long sabbatical can also help avoid that the remote worker starts to feel drained.

Remote workers typically *tend to overwork* rather than *underwork*. This is especially the case if they love their job or feel a big responsibility for it. If your wife’s out for the night, it’s tempting to pick up your laptop and finish up the project. People working from home must learn to demarcate “work and play.” Some people achieve this by simply putting on a blazer and tie during work time, others by stepping into a separate room that serves as their office. Another suggestion is to use different computers for work and private affairs.

Remote work is *not all or nothing*. For many people, a hybrid approach works best. In the mornings, they work from home while they drive to their office in the afternoons. Others have a part-time “people job” alongside their solitary remote work. If people find remote work too solitary, it might help to change to a library, a cafe with Wi-Fi, or a co-working facility.

### *Issues relevant within an SIL context*

The job description of the translation consultant contains a good deal of what could be called remote work. Since the field visits take up only a very limited portion of the working time, the bulk of the work is remote. The book cannot be expected to make remote work more rewarding, but it can give valuable hints to improve the constellation in which a translation consultant does his work.

If one compares the outlook of this book, which originates in the scene of computer programming, with common practice within SIL, the differences are striking. I’m not just

talking about the free company credit card that might give us an occasional pang of jealousy. Obviously, the principle of partnership funding puts remote workers and field office personnel (SIL members) alike on a tight budget, while WO personnel is often salaried according to market standards. But the way in which finances are channelled, with a 10% assessment for field (SIL) and home (Wycliffe) organizations, suggests somehow that the remote worker and the organizational shell belong to different compartments.

So when I read “To instill a sense of company cohesion and to share forward motion, everyone needs to feel that they are in the loop,” I could relate to it. Personalized attention is a point that can and should be improved. As it is now, communication is often limited to bulk emails, directed to all members, and personalized emails are often in the way of asking something. For example, “could you lead a workshop / check a book,” “could you provide a gripping story for our latest Wycliffe news,” “please give a presentation,” “we found you haven’t voted for / replied to...” etc. In my experience, many SIL members feel “outside the loop.” I’d like to encourage both SIL and Wycliffe personnel to read their remote workers’ reports and drop an occasional phone call, say, four times a year. “These quick calls prevent issues and concerns from piling up without being addressed,” as the authors say. In my opinion, this is a healthier approach than the silent assumption that everything is OK unless someone complains loudly enough.

The notion that Wycliffe and SIL are there for its members is underdeveloped. “What can we do for you?” is a question that is almost never asked. When I asked if someone could come to check my workspace for ergonomics, all I got was an internet link. It would also have been possible to share experiences about office furniture (“In the Wycliffe office we have good experiences with that type of chair.”). To be sure, SIL does provide software, such as Paratext, Translator’s Workplace, LinguaLinks, VocabManager etc. But costly digital resources such as Logos or printed ones such as dictionaries, grammars or Bible commentaries and things such as professional and library memberships all go on the remote worker’s budget.

The idea that consultants have to manage on their own is so strong that several times I paid significant amounts out of my own pocket for things which I later heard could have been covered by SIL funds for research and development. It simply didn’t occur to me that such things were really possible. For example, travel costs and boarding for professional conferences, professional literature to stay updated etc. I would encourage SIL to actively distribute among its members a list of funds available for professional development.

SIL is very good in leaving responsibility with its remote workers. This gives them lots of freedom to use their time as they think best. Going for a walk to refresh your

mind is no sin. In this respect, SIL lives up to its academic standards, without pressing its members to produce. If its workers use their freedom wisely, it can help them to thrive. However, from the above it becomes clear that the boundary between delegating responsibility and indifference is quite thin.

Strictly speaking, a dichotomy between Wycliffe/SIL and its members does not exist. SIL is a self-governed, democratic body. In practice, however, its democratic structure is long outdated. And the Reinvention debate has shown that many members feel a gap between the organization and themselves. And as the foregoing discussion has made it clear, from the translation consultants' perspective more clarity about the responsibility of WO and SIL for their home-based remote workers is desirable. If this remains a weak spot, a kind of trade union for translation consultants could be an idea. It could channel info about, e.g., tools and funds for professional development to the right people, and at the same time inform Wycliffe/SIL about the interests of its members.