The virtual team: a new era of digital collaboration

No more new starter lunches, team drinks or bonding over coworking ping-pong tables, the London tech startup scene is dramatically different in 2020. We interviewed seasoned entrepreneur Sian Morley-Smith about how to grow your team in a pandemic and the changes she's made to hiring and training for the 10 new team members joining ToucanTech during COVID-19.

[Maddyness] What led you to increase the ToucanTech workforce by almost a third during a global pandemic? What did you choose to invest in, and why?

[Sian] Simply the right time, right place! We've <u>been working for four years</u> to build a product that we're confident offers a <u>valuable solution for our customers</u> and target market, and on top of that, we have just completed our first external investment round. It was the right time and place for our business to expand. We have invested in a new commercial department; building out our sales and marketing teams and focusing on expanding our audience to

reach new leads.

It hasn't been easy to manage to hire 10 new starters during this turbulent time, and it took a lot of faith in our company and hard work from our existing team to make this process a success, but we're already feeling the benefit of having more hands-on deck as we enter a steep growth stage.

How did you overcome the challenge of hiring a virtual stranger?

I recently finished Blink by Malcolm Gladwell, which said that observers of interviews can predict with over 90% accuracy whether a candidate will be hired – after just two minutes of an interview! We are all prejudiced and meeting in person can actually distract us from what's important in a new hire.

For this reason, I do the screening call on my direct hires personally and there's no video to distract us. Then if I'm enjoying the call and I'm happy for it to go longer than scheduled, we'll move the candidate to the next stage – a video call (or two) with their team and/ or direct manager where they get down to the nitty-gritty!

As a female-founded tech startup, how do you ensure diversity and inclusion within your business and in your hiring process?

The lack of diversity both in tech and startups is well-known, so the fact that ToucanTech's senior leadership and coding and product team are 50% female already puts us in a welcome minority. We strive for diversity from management down to our wider team: between our team of 38, we are eleven different ethnicities and speak over 20 languages, which is a great start for a growing, global company.

We celebrate the benefits that come with having such a diverse team, from the difference in thinking that leads us to creative solutions for our customers and partners, to the multi-lingual chats and array of stories that are shared from around the world.

What kind of onboarding experience have you tried to create for your new starters?

Onboarding is difficult and can be dull! People start new jobs excited and then spend days or weeks feeling overwhelmed by acronyms and documentation. We try to get the tech set-up done in advance of day one. Then employees can concentrate on the meaty stuff straight away. We tend to hire people when an area of our businesses is underserved or there's a new opportunity to focus on.

In both cases, a manager should breakdown all the projects and activities the company needs and give enough detail so that the new starter can begin to prioritise their work. You hired someone great, right? Then you trust them to deliver. Beyond this, my first mentor told me the most important thing you can give your team is time. Do this too!

Are you juggling multiple digital systems, or relying on email to stay connected?

ToucanTech was already well set up to train our new starters online: we already conduct virtual product demos, train and support our customers through Zoom, use Trello to define tasks, communicate throughout the day on Skype and Slack, and organise files in Google Drive and Dropbox. We even use our own ToucanTech product internally to bring together everything in a single hub for the team. The hardest part is trusting that a sense of team spirit and the company culture can be translated online.

Many things can be lost in translation when your interaction has been limited to online…e.g. 'Do they have a really dry sense of humour or are they a bit annoyed?'. Let's not even get started with sarcasm! We try to counteract the risks with informal virtual gatherings, summer socials, and instant messaging for quick conversations – encouraging non-work chit chat as well as shop talk. Emojis have been a really useful tool over the last few months (I never thought I'd say that!).

Senior management has to set an example when it comes to accessibility and normalising frequent communication using a variety of channels (and emojis).

What has surprised you about running your business during COVID? Has it opened any opportunities for ToucanTech?

The nice surprise is that it hasn't been that tough for our company and staff to adapt and the exciting part is the added value we provided for our customers that was already built into our product. Overnight, running digital fundraising, managing online communities and hosting virtual events was the only way forward for many development offices and charitable/NFP organisations, and our customers were able to pivot to new strategies using ToucanTech.

This time has certainly pushed digital ways of networking and fundraising into the mainstream and we have been perfectly poised to take advantage of these new opportunities. We've also heard so many great stories from customers who have been connecting people through their ToucanTech community platforms to help with the COVID relief effort, from creating PPE for local hospitals to supporting vulnerable members with food drops. We're so proud that our product has been used to help provide practical help during this difficult period and it has reinforced just how flexible and dynamic the ToucanTech software is.

Read also

Can companies change working culture to accommodate remote working?

Article by SIAN MORLEY-SMITH