

# Being comfortable outside of your comfort zone: An interview with Simon Houghton-Williams

Paul Ferretti spoke to Simon Houghton-Williams, CEO of Adaptavist, about digital transformation, company culture and the importance of taking risks.

---

## Can you tell our readers more about Adaptavist's mission?

For a long time, our mission was to be the biggest and best Atlassian partner in the world by every reasonable metric. But since then, we've evolved to focus on helping customers maximise their digital transformation agenda and trying to help them more broadly than just the Atlassian platform.

Our business model, by being a group, allows us to build startups inside their organisation. So it's almost that entrepreneur model. We've just launched a new startup that has been built on top of services from around the business, but it runs as an independent organisation inside Adaptavist and that's a model that we use and repeat, and we encourage that kind of innovation.

# How has your company disrupted the digital transformation space?

I think there are five pillars to complete in order to achieve digital transformation;

DevOps. It's all about taking and being able to deploy technology rapidly and in line with the business.

Agility

Cloud and cloud activities are inevitably a key to achieving digital transformation.

Work management and the way that work is deployed and shared around the business.

Service management, also known as ITSM, is key to the way that businesses are structured, interact with the outside world and interact with themselves.

## Can you tell us more about the challenge of managing a remote first multinational corporation?

I think it's all about culture.

There's a question about whether you create the culture that allows you to do that or whether building the team of people that creates the culture. I'm a big believer in culture and what people do.

*"Culture is not something you tell from the centre, everybody in the business has to believe in it."*

When we bring in new people, they also have to be part of it, because everybody in the business has to be part of fixing that challenge. Everyone is lined up on the same agenda of building a business that supports people no

matter where they're working. And we always think that people should work where they work best.

Generally speaking, the individual or the team they are working in knows that rather than somebody at the centre.

## Would you say that you're on the front line of helping people?

I think it's about empowering people, allowing people to be themselves.

I look at people who work with us for a long time, such as our head of services. He would take a couple of hours off during the day to go and pick his kids up from school. Some of his team was in the US and so he would work in the evenings. We encourage people to set their own work patterns that fit in with their lives.

Clearly you have to turn up to meetings and do the things that matter around business, but you have to do the things that matter in your life as well. It's about finding that balance, and we trust our people and encourage them to find it.

We're a software and consulting business, which means we're all about people. Software is really only the distilled work of people.

*"People are the only thing that matter."*

## Do you have any advice for other homegrown startups aiming for global success?

The best piece of advice is focus and work hard. Focusing and working hard never really goes out of fashion. But that's kind of a glib thing to say. You also have to be open to taking risks. And evaluate the potential upside is probably key to success.

All risks are not created equal, and so I would encourage people to look at risks

and consider whether to take them or not as opposed to saying I'm not going to take any risks.

*"If you take no risk, you'll achieve nothing."*

If you're a tiny little company, the set of risks that you can take are different than a larger company. You have to take each risk on its merits.

If you're comfortable, you're going to limit your success. I don't think I've ever seen something be truly successful without some level of discomfort.

Part of my interview process with people is telling them about needing to be comfortable outside their comfort zone. Because when you're innovating, you spend time outside your comfort zone and that becomes normal. You sort of develop a degree of comfort in that slightly uncomfortable position.

## Is there anyone who inspires you?

Oh, there's a lot of people who inspire me. I look at people like Steve Jobs and, that might seem almost like a trite thing to say, but he revolutionised the industry.

I also look at the whole situation that's going on with Altman and AI people now, and you can take inspiration from everything that's going on there. I think we're really lucky to live in an industry where that inspiration is happening right in front of our eyes every day.

Simon Houghton-Williams is the CEO of Adaptavist.