How tech startups can introduce cross-functional working to succeed

In the dynamic realm of technology startups, maintaining a competitive edge requires adaptability, flexibility, and ingenuity. WOLF, our tech venture headquartered in London, has recent experience of having to be adaptable and creative to help our business to thrive.

WOLF comprises two main entities: _WOLF Qanawat_, an audio entertainment community app tailored for the MENA market, and WOLF Technologies, specialising in crafting online community platforms for external partners. Recently, we underwent a profound transformation that revolutionised our approach to team collaboration, igniting a fresh sense of ownership, concentration, and cohesion.

Prior to this shift, our teams functioned more in isolated silos, lacking the most cohesive, unified focus. Situated across diverse geographical locations, each department operated independently within product and engineering domains.

Motivated by our dedication to meeting business objectives, instilling ownership and accountability among team members, and achieving swift delivery, we embarked on a transformational journey. This change of approach was spearheaded by myself and supported by an exceptional team. Transitioning from segregated, compartmentalised teams to cross-functional squads, we have witnessed significant advancements in product development since.

A break from the old routines

It became apparent that we needed to change our team structures and move to cross-functional squads to improve efficiency, create better internal communication, and create a better sense of ownership for specific projects and tasks.

For instance, one particular challenge we faced as a digital tech firm was that in technology, Backend (server) and Frontend (mobile client) teams naturally tend to operate in isolation. The issue often revolves around the design of application programming interfaces (APIs) for the mobile client. When APIs are designed in isolation, they may not align optimally with the specific needs and what would work best for the mobile client.

Consequently, when the mobile client receives the API, it becomes apparent that changes and optimisation are required. This realisation initiates a cycle of back-and-forth adjustments to refine the APIs, ensuring they are well-suited and efficient for the mobile client. This iterative process can lead to delays, increased communication loads, and potential inefficiencies in the overall development workflow.

Positive outcomes

Changing our team structures has delivered some outstanding results for our business. Our delivery process has undergone a remarkable transformation, achieving improved speed and efficiency. Tasks that traditionally took approximately six to eight months of development time are now seamlessly executed within a mere one to three month timeframe.

This heightened pace not only accelerates project timelines but also empowers us to iterate rapidly. The ability to move swiftly enables us to respond dynamically to evolving requirements and incorporate feedback from our users, fostering a more agile and responsive development cycle. This enhanced efficiency represents a significant leap forward in our delivery capabilities, propelling us towards more streamlined and efficient project timelines.

It has also helped the brand to quickly develop in a number of key ways, including re-branding from 'WOLF' to 'WOLF Qanawat', to make it more appealing to Arabic-speaking communities in the core MENA market.

Other key developments include smoothly launching a VR experience for our customers, quickly followed by the introduction of an AI virtual assistant called 'Yasmine'. 'Yasmine' is an ideal virtual 'customer representative' for the app's users, as AI virtual assistants are proving very popular among younger

consumers, like those who form WOLF Qanawat's user base.

Patience is a virtue

To any other SMEs thinking about moving from isolated, departmentalised teams to cross-functional squads, my advice is that you need to have patience and instil trust in the structure of a cross-functional squad. Presenting the value behind this change is crucial for the team's understanding and commitment. It's important to acknowledge that realising the optimal value from a cross-functional squad will take time; building effective teamwork and synergy requires a few months of collaborative effort.

Patience is key as the team navigates through the initial phases of adjustment and gradually refines its collaborative dynamics. By emphasising the long-term benefits and instilling confidence in the team, you pave the way for sustained success and cohesive collaboration in the future.

Communication is key

The other piece of advice I can offer is to avoid a lack of clear communication during the transition to cross-functional squads. Clearly articulate the reasons behind the change, the benefits, and the expected outcomes to ensure everyone is on the same page. Do not ignore team input and feedback – involve team members in decision-making fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the new structure.

Celebrating and recognising progress is important, boosts morale and reinforces the positive aspects of the transition. It's essential to have the right tools in place to help ease communications and collaboration between cross-functional squads, such as Slack, JIRA, Miro or Figjam.

Our successful transition to cross-functional squads was driven by a visionary leadership team that recognised the value of change. The unwavering belief and support from our development director, head of delivery, and their teams, coupled with their patience, were crucial factors in making the transition both enjoyable and successful.

Integration is the way forward

Our existing cross-functional squad comprises essential roles such as Scrum Master, Product Owner, UX/UI specialists, Frontend (clients, web and mobile) and Backend developers, QA, and Data Analysts. To further enrich the collaborative environment, we aim to extend the involvement to include

members from the Marketing and Community departments.

By integrating expertise from these areas, we seek to create a holistic and well-rounded squad that not only excels in technical aspects but also incorporates strategic marketing insights and community engagement perspectives. This expansion aligns with our commitment to fostering a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach within our squads, ensuring a more integrated and collaborative working environment.

Ultimately, while introducing cross-functional squads can be beneficial, it's crucial to recognise that every organisation has its unique characteristics and values. Tweaking the way you introduce cross-functional squads to align with the specific requirements and subtle features of your organisation is key for success.

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