



# Episode 10:

## The Benefits and Challenges of Managing a Remote Workforce

[A transcript of this episode.](#)

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Welcome to the Professional Website Investor podcast, the show where we talk about what it takes to successfully buy, operate, scale and sell a thriving eCommerce business. When it comes to doing business online, we believe that buying an existing website is far superior to building one from scratch. If you're a career professional who is looking to become an eCommerce store owner, listening to this show will give you the knowledge, tools and community support you need to be successful.

I'm your host Ryan Cowden and this week we're joined by Ian Bond from ProfessionalWebsiteInvestors.com. In this episode of The Professional Website Investor Podcast, Ian and I discussed the strategies and tools you need to effectively manage your remote workers. In our previous episode, we discussed the importance of finding and hiring virtual employees to help you scale your business. Today, we're covering the best practices to help you manage those workers once you bring them onto your team.

When managing remote workers, it's important to remember that what works in the physical world still applies in the digital world. Having clear expectations, open channels of communication and good relationships are all still essential parts of your job. What changes in the virtual setting is how this happens.

On this episode, you'll learn what your expectations should be of your virtual workers. You should track progress visually and have clear procedures in place where all virtual workers can see that. Second, you'll learn some tips

and strategies to facilitate good communication. Apps like Asana and Slack make virtual communication much easier.

Third, you'll hear how to give positive and negative feedback to outsourced workers, you should get to know the culture of the people you hire and how they give and receive communication. Finally, we'll consider some more cross-cultural factors you may need to consider when working with virtual workers.

These include assuming the best of all workers, assuming that they want to succeed, and putting yourself in their shoes as you work with them. There's a lot of actionable advice in this episode, so grab something to write with because you're going to want to take notes. As always, I'll be back on the other side to wrap up any loose ends. So without any further ado, here's my conversation with Ian Bond.

**RYAN:** All right. Ian, welcome back to the show. How's it been, man?

**IAN:** Ryan, it's just been terrific, it's great to see you again. It's pleasure to look through and we have especially good topic today. So excited to jump right in but it's great to see you.

**RYAN:** Yeah, it's great to see you too. Yeah, so our last episode we were talking about scaling up our business and outsourcing work. So today, we thought it would be a good idea to talk about what it would actually take to work with and manage remote workers and that's something that you have all have experience with.

**IAN:** I have experience you know the job, my day job before this, I had 12 time zones reporting to me.

**RYAN:** No way. Wow.

**IAN:** Yes, so I would wake up and check on what was going on in London and Dubai and then you know as I was going to bed every night at dinner, my guy on the West Coast Michael would call me and the phone would ring and my wife would say, "Say hi to Michael," who would talk about issues on the West Coast. And so that was just the way the day went. And so the

weather always in my day job or now in my, and our activities our e-commerce activities. You know it's I'm not a stranger to managing across time zones, across cultures and things like that, so it's fine.

RYAN: Great. Well, I think a good place to start would be expectations, what are some good expectations that you should set from the beginning with your freelance workers?

IAN: Yeah, okay. So again let's roll back and bucket, our outsourced workers into two buckets one are the experts, that's fairly simple to have someone where you are having a conversation and they are a professional providing a service for you, that could be editorial for a blog, that could be paid traffic for an e-commerce site. You are having an ongoing conversation about the strategy, the deliverables, that type of thing with what I would call an outsource expert.

Then we have our people that are working for us full time in e-commerce that really buckets into people that are doing development work for us, on product uploading and people that are doing our customer service. And specifically that latter group the customer service people, they really are full time employees the developers are much more working by the job. So there's nuances between all three of those different, but that last one is probably the one we want to drill down now.

RYAN: Okay, so working with that last group, what are your expectations for them?

IAN: Well as I described we have a, I wouldn't call it NASA-like, it'd be a little bit, it's a little bit big. We have a big board in Asana where we track everything and every time a customer service representative of ours is chasing something down or something comes in. We either close out an issue or an item on that's been highlighted in Asana or we initiate one, and when we initiate one that means we go directly into our SOPs or Standard Operating Procedures. And any one of our VAs wouldn't know our customer service people, wouldn't know kind of what would be the next thing to do when we have an item that's being returned or an item that's damaged or an inquiry.

Whatever it might be they would know what to do and anyone could pick up that and respond. Since we have people coming in at different time of the US workday, we have two shifts, we have an early shift and late shift. Sometimes something that starts out in the morning with one person can change later that morning with a sec another person that's on this same earlier shift and can change later with a couple of people that are on the later shift.

So you have to have the clarity of the process or the procedure so that people know exactly how they can close this out, so that the customer gets the best experience. To be clear for everyone listening to this, if you're in the online retailing world the only reason that you exist, the only reasons that you exist are providing incredible advice and suggestions and exceptional customer service.

If you're going to compete with the big box retailers, I don't care if it's Sears or Home Builders that was almost gone now, or Home Depot or any of the garden variety big online superstores like Wayfair or Hayneedle. You have to provide better advice, better access information and a better experience. The number of people that buy something from Home Depot and try and return it through us, just reaffirms that kind of on a weekly basis to make.

So the way we do that is by having these processes and procedures really tightened down so that we can be proactively solving problems for clients and presuming what the problems might be.

RYAN: Okay, great. So, if people are gonna be working all over the world in 12 different time zones, communication is going to be an important piece. Are there any softwares or just other apps or strategy that you use to help your group communicate?

IAN: Yes, and this raises an area that actually we're debating right now, something that we're debating so yes, okay. So I mentioned that we have a team and project management software called Asana, we also have we use Slack which is another unicorn from Silicon Valley and it's essentially dedicated chat through the tip never, if someone is not familiar with Slack. It's dedicated chat, there's either group chat or individuals every individual you can have a direct message.

Our customer service team which speaks in a different language, they chat amongst themselves on stuff and we don't know what they're saying, although we do. So we have those two, we have those two things.

Obviously we have team conference calls where we talk to the team about any issues that they want to raise. Team reaches out to us regularly, I mentioned that you know one of the things we're debating is, are we at the size where we should have ... We've grown our customer service and support team where everyone can do everything, and we're at the point where we're thinking, "Should we employ a team leader who can step in and help prioritize things for the team and then assign out tasks to the team?"

And we've tried to do that before and we had someone it didn't work out great, we tried to hire someone not from within our team and quite frankly our team was working better than without that person. So now we've gone back, we've gone back and I think to be honest with you Ryan, The reality is that the longevity of the people that has been working with us and the commitment we've made to kind of communication and particularly the granularity around the procedures and the processes.

It's all working really well. If we expand from this point on, I think then you know that team leader person is going to be something that we're going to have to think hard about.

RYAN: Okay, great. So giving feedback is also something that needs to happen in terms of positive and negative feedback. What do you kind of think about? What is good feedback look like when you're giving feedback to your workers?

IAN: Well, good feedback is relatively easy and we love to put people's name in lights and have them feel good about coming to work. We do pay incentives to people and we do pay people a bonus if they do something that is meaningful ... We'd like to have people aligned with the economics of the business, and so they are always pointing out to us something where, "Hey, it looks like there could be a financial problem on this order," our cost is too high or the shipping quote came in horrible or something like that.

And then you know particularly where someone goes above and beyond what they would normally do in their job to get an order or to save an order

or to upsell something that a customer we know will need when they buy one thing they'll get two or three things other things. So we love to do that, I think the trickier thing is you're about to ask me is what do we do about negative feedback?

RYAN: Like the right way to do that and the wrong way to do that.

IAN: Okay, so that's that's actually something that is particularly tricky because it has cultural implications. I've worked now on four continents and I can tell you that this is always the case. I have had men and women break down crying in my office. So you know because I was horrible at doing exactly what we're talking about. And I've had people euphoric and you know you make ... So unfortunately, I've been in the corporate world for a long period of time and you get better at it. So it make some horrible mistakes early on, but I would say that particularly with regards to working with let's just talk about two specific situations where it can be tricky.

The Philippine Virtual Assistants, our customer service team in the Philippines, that is a tricky dynamic that you have to be very sensitive to how you engage people relative to their colleagues and how you engage them. And I would say, you try to engage them in a very proactive fashion in the sense that this is not a culture where shaming and terrifically negative feedback is well assimilated. It's not a confrontational culture.

Now, a lot of our developers on the other hand are incredibly thick skin. This is a group of people from Bangladesh and Pakistan, they have some of them have very strict observance of their religious views and won't work on projects that they think may conflict with their religious views. Or we've had people say you know, "I think that this conflicts with some things," and that's something that you just have to respect.

The other thing is and my wife handles our developers because they're literally on a team, there's almost the same time zone as we do. It's a very male focused and so she has some ethical back and forth with these guys. They are not shy about telling her that they're the people that are the experts in computer language and she's saying, "Look, you may be the expert in the programming stuff but this is the way it's gotta look or it's not what I want."

So that is you know almost did the opposite, I've seen them. She has with one of our long time developers literally has built stories for us, Habib. That they'd love and hate each other at any given moment and they're going back and forth, oh, they're going back and forth and arguing over the fine point or something. We actually have a place where when he has written something that we just think is a classic, we save it because we just laugh and just you know say, "This was just classic Habib."

I would tell you that you have to be and as I mentioned, I've worked on four continents, I've had people for all kinds of different cultural issues. When you're dealing with somebody that's not from your neighborhood or from your borough or your town, you obviously have to, you're kind of have a broader view of interpersonal communication.

RYAN: One of the things that you said that I thought was really fascinating was you've created this culture where your team can point out things to you.

IAN: Well, that's critical. Yeah.

RYAN: I don't think that exists everywhere.

IAN: I think the big rap on using people that don't come into your factory every day or into your warehouse every day, the big rap is that if you're not paying for their health care and if you're not paying for, I don't know their lunch break or whatever it is there's a school of thought out there and some pretty big name proponents saying, "In America you can hire incredibly talented people in this day and age," and they don't want to be entrepreneurs they just want to work for people that share their same values and that you know where they can do interesting work and where they can grow professionally, okay?

RYAN: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

IAN: We try to do all of those things we just do that, not where people coming into it. So we have courses that we buy and we put people through so that they can expand their skill set. Give you a great example, in the Philippines, Christmas holiday time, it is typical for a 13th month salary to be

paid as it is in many parts in the world, we pay that. We don't ever, we go with the local customs and we respect that.

I think if you do those types of things, you will engender the kind of the feedback that we're asking for which is you know, if everybody is understands after someone's work for you a period of time you can point out to them and everyone on our team knows. If they see something quickly, escalated, escalated, escalated. Most of the time stuff runs beautifully but you know we don't ever want something that drags on. This is part of I think kind of the rule of how you have to operate in the kind of the Amazon retail world.

Amazon you know everything gets there you know faster and fast ... It seems like it's faster and faster right? So customer service with Amazon is never an issue. Now, we do things that Amazon would never touch, it's much more complicated. We're a logistics business as much as we are in whatever store that we're operating it's logistics, it's back and forth with the customers. But that expectation for customer service is very, very high and Amazon keeps pushing it high regardless of the fact that we're not directly competing with them.

So it's incumbent on us to do that and I think you know I've said this before, there are only a few reasons that we are allowed to exist. We have to provide incredible information for people to make a decision and selection for people to look at. We have to give people great advice and we have to excel and provide excellent customer service at a very minimum that's what we have to do.

RYAN: Right, and is that because you're not always gonna be able to compete in terms of just sheer price? Is that why to your service actually better?

IAN: No, actually we operate with the vast bulk of the people that are supplying us with our suppliers are enforcing Minimum Advertised Pricing which is known as MAP pricing. So everyone must sell no lower than a number that the supplier tells, so it's not even a price issue.

RYAN: Okay. That's just the expectation.



IAN: Yeah, I look. So I forget the numbers but if you go back to the late 1990s, there was a period of time when internet users doubled in a four or five period year four or five year period of time from, I don't know, 30 million to 60 million internet users. It was like for 1998 to 2001 or 2002. Maybe it was five years, it was three years.

And then in the next couple of years it exploded and went way beyond that, okay? So I think what we're in is we're in a period of time right now where the online experience, online shopping experience is growing from less than 10 percent away from Amazon to much higher than that over the next five years. So we're very early in the adoption curve and it is allowed platforms like the house platform which is great for household products.

It's allowed them to step in and be kind of a trust agent. So people that might not have been online shoppers before they trust house and they might not have shopped online before. Particularly, as you move up higher in prices, you run into that. It's still early in the game in e-commerce, we forget.

RYAN: That's right. That's right. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about in terms of working cross culturally with different people? Anything else that you could share with us about ...

IAN: Those were my two best stories to be honest with you. But I would tell you it doesn't matter if it's my day job where we have a multitude of different nationalities, or if it's in our online stuff. You have to respect, always put yourself in the shoes of the people you're dealing with. I think that all of the people that report to me day and night job they all try to think at the best they possibly can on how they can do a good job and they all want to grow professionally and they all want to be helpful and I think they all feel like that.

I think probably corporate America does this really well with you know performance appraisals and it's that time of year where people are getting their performance appraisal. And I think you know that feedback is very valuable but to be honest with you, I think that daily and weekly feedback no one should ever have to guess on whether or not they're doing a good job, or whether they're not something they did was good or not appreciated or something like that.

I tell my boss that by the time he gets a performance appraisal time, it's shame on me if we're not aligned because it's my job to get into his head. Now, he's incredible at giving me and people that I've worked for, some have been better than others but they're incredible at you know keeping you aligned with what they want. So we tried to do that in our e-commerce business just keeping people align for kind of what the goal is and telling them what we expect of them, and helping them get there.

Now, we're expanding some of the responsibilities and some of the things they do and they're growing professionally and so they're learning and it's a little hard because you get into a comfort zone. Now, we're having to correct things that they're doing. So it's fun but it's always changing.

RYAN: For sure.

IAN: I would say, working across cultures is always tricky but it is not simple, it's just take some thoughtfulness and take some work to do.

RYAN: Okay, well that's great advice, Ian. I think that's about all the time we have for, so-

IAN: Thank you, Ryan.

RYAN: We'll see you in a few weeks.

IAN: Okay, thanks, man.

RYAN: Thanks.

RYAN: All right folks there you have it. That wraps up my conversation with Ian Bond of The Professional Website Investor Podcast. He shared a ton of valuable insights and advice today on how to lead and communicate with your virtual employees.

As always, we'll think of any tools or resources we discussed in the show notes at [www.ProfessionalWebsiteInvestors.com](http://www.ProfessionalWebsiteInvestors.com). Hope you enjoyed our conversation and consider subscribing sharing with a friend or leaving us a review in your favorite podcast directory. Until next time, best of luck in all

that you do and we'll look forward to seeing you on the next episode of The Professional Website Investor Podcast.

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