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Effective Remote Work

For Yourself, Your Team, and Your Company

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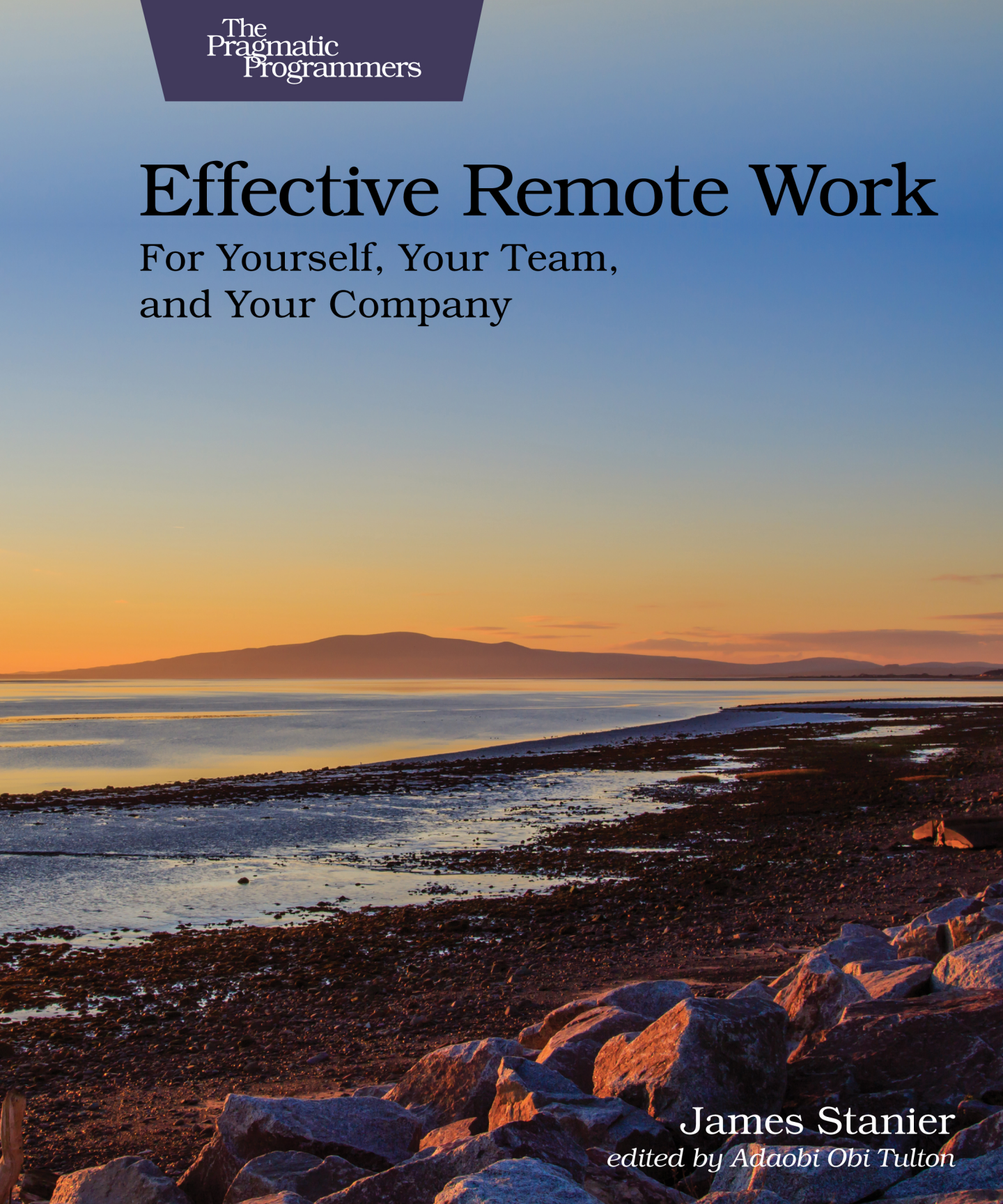
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Effective Remote Work

For Yourself, Your Team, and Your Company

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*We're all pilgrims on the same journey—but some pilgrims
have better road maps.*

➤ *Nelson DeMille*

Onboarding and Orientation

Monday, 9:15 a.m. You open your laptop, take a sip of your coffee, and log on to chat. Unread messages. A lot of them, from a lot of people. This is strange. One is from your manager. It's from late Friday evening. You click it.

```
[19:54] susan: Forgot to ask. is everything OK for Kevin starting on Monday?
```

Hang on. That's today. Uh-oh.

```
[08:45] mike: Did Kevin get his laptop delivered OK? I haven't heard from him.
```

You feel the wave of embarrassment. You forgot to check in with Kevin last week, ahead of him starting today. In fact, you completely forgot that he was joining the company altogether. He was on a three-month-notice period at his previous employer, and it's been so long since the interview happened that everything to do with Kevin had completely slipped your mind.

You immediately open your email and search your inbox for *Kevin.* You can't find his address or mobile number—only his personal email address. You fire off a quick email.

```
Hey Kevin,

It's me. I'm so sorry that I didn't check in last week.
Is everything OK? Did you get your laptop?

Please call me on 07700 900796 and I'll get this sorted for you right away.
```

You're now late for stand-up. You join the video call. Lara waves.

"There you are! Where's Kevin? We're excited to meet him!"

You sigh. "I dropped the ball last week and I forgot to check in with him ahead of today. I'm just getting in touch with him now, and I'll get him all set up when he gets back to me. We can do a welcome call later. Sound good?"

Your phone vibrates.

"Hello, this is Kevin. I just got your email."

You breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm so sorry that I didn't check in at the end of last week. Shall we get your laptop set up so you can say hello to the team?"

"What laptop?"

"The laptop that we sent you via courier."

"I haven't received anything here. Did your recruitment team get my email about my change of address?"

Uh-oh.

Another message from the IT manager pops up on your screen.

```
[09:28] mike: looks like Kevin's set up his password and logged in
[09:29] you: I don't think that's Kevin ... calling you right now
```

Cast your mind back to the last time you started a new job in an office. Was there excitement as you walked into the building for the first time and collected your ID card? Bewilderment as you saw the other new employees sitting in the breakout area as you entered? Were there friendly smiles while shaking hands with new colleagues? What was it like being shown around the office and to your desk? Meeting your teammates? Perhaps you all went to lunch together on your first day. Maybe you even got the Grand Tour of the Fire Escapes.

Starting a new job in a physical office is a daunting experience. It's a bit like transferring school halfway through the academic year. You're the new kid, and you're busy surveying the environment to work out where you fit in and who all of the new people are.

To address this initially overwhelming period of newness, companies typically employ numerous strategies to help employees find their feet. They may be hired as part of a batch to make them feel less alone during the orientation period. Perhaps they get assigned a mentor or buddy for their first few months. There may be lunches or socials arranged to help connect them to others in the company. They may be encouraged to never eat alone at lunch time by joining tables with other employees they haven't yet met.

All of these are opportunities for new starters to immerse themselves in the culture of a company by being immersed within the *physical* environment. They interact with a wide array of other employees and see how others work and collaborate with each other first hand, by example.

But what does this experience mean for a remote employee? Unfortunately, at many hybrid companies, remote onboarding is often an afterthought. This is especially true if the bulk of employees still work in offices. It's easy to feel like a second-class citizen if you aren't there in person. This chapter is about giving you the framework to change that experience.

In this chapter we're going to spend some time thinking about remote onboarding. But instead of talking about it like a *process* that all employees go through *once*, we're going to see how onboarding is a *lens* that we can continually apply to everything that we do, *all the time.* This is because in technology we're always onboarding new things: projects, teams, frameworks, products, and ideas. The quicker we can do this, the more effective we are as employees.

Here's what this chapter covers:

- We begin by looking at the *contribution curve,* which is a journey that we all go through when we find ourselves in a new job, team, project, or programming language.

- We introduce an *onboarding function* that comprises three onboarding areas that are important when an employee begins anything new: technical, managerial, and cultural. For each of these, we'll identify *North Stars* that we can align our activities around in a way that equalizes the experience for remote workers.

- We consider how *everything you do to make onboarding better will benefit all your existing staff.* We'll see how applying the onboarding lens to any situation can potentially make it better, especially for remote employees.

Without further ado, let's look at a graph.

The Contribution Curve

When an employee starts a new job, they transition through a *contribution curve.* It looks like the .

At the beginning and end of the line, there are two outputs for the employee:

- *Net negative.* An individual produces a net-negative output for the business as they ramp up. As horrible as it sounds, the organization would produce
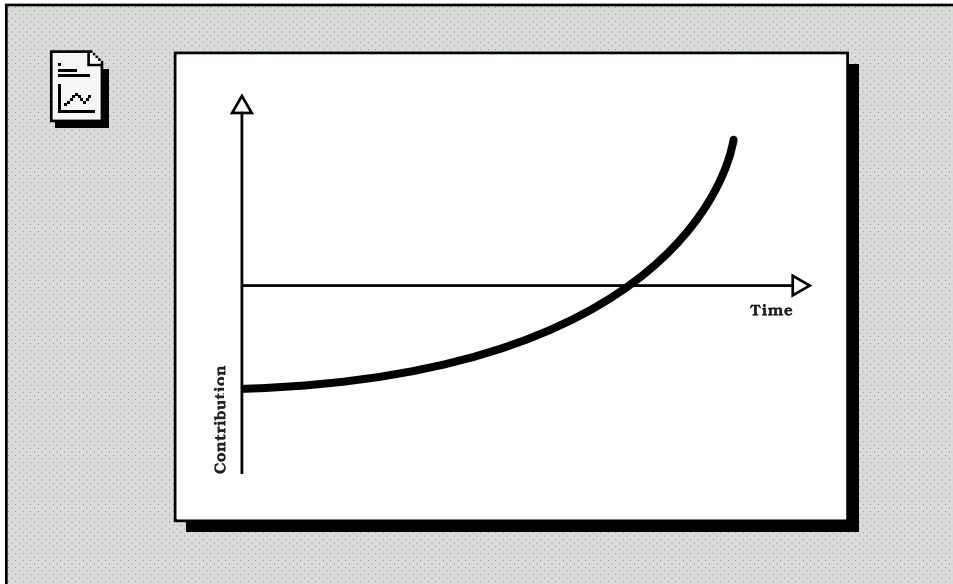
more output if the new person wasn't there because they need help from others.

- *Net positive.* An individual produces a net-positive output for the business. Some people produce more of a net-positive output than others, and you would hope that those people are rewarded fairly for doing so.

This is completely normal. Regardless of how senior or motivated a new member of staff is, starting a new job is initially disorienting and requires a ramping-up period. After all, the new starter has never seen this codebase before, has never worked with their new colleagues before, isn't well-connected inside the company, and hasn't really experienced how to get things done effectively in their new role. They've had no feedback loops to learn from yet.
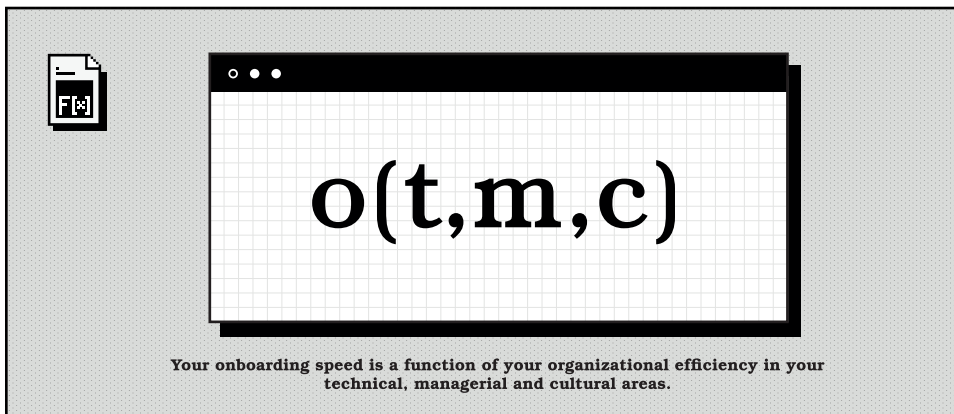
This is where good management and mentorship come in. Existing employees should be allocating as much time as they can to accelerate an employee through the contribution curve so they can become net positive in their output. The new employee needs to understand the technology being built, the business problems being solved, and the codebases and tools being used to solve them. As they produce code of their own, they may need increased guidance as it's being written, and the code may need more scrutiny as it's being reviewed—hence, a net-negative contribution. It's an additional pull on everyone else's time.

However, gradually, the new employee becomes net positive in their contribution. They require less support when developing new code, and they may be able to begin mentoring others who are less experienced. They understand the business problems and the codebase so they can operate more autonomously.

The Onboarding Equation

Onboarding is the action or process of integrating a new employee into an organization. Successful onboarding is a function that moves an individual through the contribution curve as fast as possible.

This function looks like the following figure.

Your onboarding speed is a function of your organizational efficiency in your technical, managerial and cultural areas.

The onboarding function *o* is composed of three inputs:

- *Technical onboarding (t).* A new employee needs to understand what's being built, what the business problems are that are being solved, and how to begin to be productive using their primary skill set.

- *Managerial onboarding (m).* A new employee needs to grow their relationship with their manager to understand how their work fits into the wider picture of the team, product, and company.

- *Cultural onboarding (c).* A new employee needs to connect to others in the wider company, gaining the feeling that they're among friends and colleagues sharing a united purpose.

The better the job we do in each of these onboarding areas, the faster the new employee becomes a net-positive contributor. In fact, it's about more than just their output. It's about their satisfaction and happiness. A useful model to use to think about this is that of *autonomy, mastery, and purpose [Pin09]*:

- *Autonomy.* We have a desire to be self-directed. With the right management, a new employee can exercise choice in how they approach their work while still contributing to the collective goal. They can tackle problems in their own way while understanding the boundaries that they're working within. They can feel empowered by their freedom.

- *Mastery.* Everyone likes to improve their skills. Not only does it benefit the company they're working for, it benefits them too. With the right mentorship, new employees can not only perform well but they can improve their skills and begin to see tangible progress in this new phase of their career.

- *Purpose.* We all want to contribute to something greater than ourselves. With exposure to the right message and people, new employees can understand how their work fits into the wider purpose of the company. This could range from helping users get their own jobs done quicker, to improving the efficiency of a delivery supply chain, to enabling people to have fun while playing a video game. Understanding the real difference you're making to the lives of others makes work more fulfilling.

Thinking back to our onboarding function, you can see how it maps to this model. Successful *technical* onboarding is the beginning of the journey to achieve mastery. Good *management* ensures that a new employee can develop their autonomy. Feeling *culturally connected* to the company ensures that they can find their purpose. This is why good onboarding is so essential. In technology we're often not only turning up to work to get more dollars, we're turning up due to our work being an important part of our lives. Many of us want to make a positive contribution to a cause greater than ourselves.

In the physical office, this onboarding function can be satisfied to an acceptable level purely through osmosis. New employees observe the behaviors of those around them and gradually find their way. They have daily opportunities to easily meet others, ask questions, and receive guidance and mentorship. However, for remote employees, the opportunities for osmosis are limited. Instead, we need to be deliberate in how we onboard.

We're going to go through each of the inputs to the onboarding function in turn and consider a North Star for each. We will then unpack each North Star to see what kinds of processes, artifacts, and people we need to have in place to ensure that we can satisfy it. We will begin by addressing technical onboarding.