How we scaled our startup by being remote first

Michael Risse

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Startups are often associated with the benefits and toys provided in their offices. Foosball tables! Free food! Dog friendly! But what if the future of startups was less about physical office space and more about remote-first work environments? What if, in fact, the most compelling aspect of a startup work environment is that the employees don’t have to go to one?

A remote-first company model has been Seeq’s strategy since our founding in 2013. We have raised $35 million and grown to more than 100 employees around the globe. Remote-first is clearly working for us and may be the best model for other software companies as well.
So, who is Seeq and what’s been the key to making the remote-first model work for us? And why did we do it in the first place?

Seeq is a remote-first startup – i.e. it was founded with the intention of not having a physical headquarters or offices, and still operates that way – that is developing an advanced analytics application that enables process engineers and subject matter experts in oil & gas, pharmaceuticals, utilities, and other process manufacturing industries to investigate and publish insights from the massive amounts of sensor data they generate and store.

To succeed, we needed to build a team quickly with two skill sets: 1) software development expertise, including machine learning, AI, data visualization, open source, agile development processes, cloud, etc. and 2) deep domain expertise in the industries we target.

Which means there is no one location where we can hire all the employees we need: Silicon Valley for software, Houston for oil & gas, New Jersey for fine chemicals, Seattle for cloud expertise, water utilities across the country, and so forth. But being remote-first has made recruiting and hiring these high-demand roles easier much easier than if we were collocated.

Job postings on remote-specific web sites like FlexJobs, Remote.co and Remote OK typically draw hundreds of applicants in a matter of days. This enables Seeq to hire great employees who might not call Seattle, Houston or Silicon Valley home – and is particularly attractive to employees with location-dependent spouses or employees who simply want to work where they want to live.
But a remote-first strategy and hiring quality employees for the skills you need is not enough: succeeding as a remote-first company requires a plan and execution around the “3 C’s of remote-first”.

**The three requirements to remote-first success are the three C’s: communication, commitment and culture.**

The first requirement – communications – should now be clear to any employer, since few people today do all their work in an office. Regardless of whether a company calls itself remote-first or not, employees are already working remotely.

Yes, they may come into a physical office in the morning and go home at the end of the day, but they don’t leave work behind – not given their laptops, video conferencing, and smartphone access to email, apps and company information.

Employees are already accustomed to working at home, on the road – wherever, whenever. Thus, remote-first startups are not a huge change in the way many employees are accustomed to working – there’s no surprise there and not much to worry about (except if they answer email after midnight, or their second martini, never a good idea…).

What makes this work is the technologies that enable remote-first work have come a long way since the first days of telework, enabling engaging and nearly effortless remote work experiences. At Seeq, **Zoom** (video conferencing), Slack (team messaging) and **Confluence** (collaboration workspace) form our application stack for our remote-first organization work. These tools are easy to use and loaded with features.

As a point of comparison, I’ve worked in traditional environments for most of my career and the level of cooperation and interaction at Seeq exceeds that of any other company I’ve been a part of. The portfolio of communications for remote workers isn’t perfect – I am still looking for a great remote-first whiteboard – but the current infrastructure is miles ahead of where it was a decade ago: one-to-many meetings, integrated sound, video and screen sharing, all from your PC, from anywhere with internet access.

**The second requirement is ensuring that all colleagues are contributing to company goals through a rigorous commitment model.**
How do you know your employees are working when you can’t look over their shoulder (in case anyone actually does that anymore)? Ideally, your company culture cultivates trust, and you believe in your employees (if not, you should really get some new ones).

Accountability has not been a problem for Seeq as we focus on hiring people whom we trust. But should you want to verify their work, it has never been easier to track individual employee contributions.

For sales executives, check Salesforce. Developers? Check GitHub or one of the Atlassian applications. A marketer? Check HubSpot. For creatives, there’s Basecamp. For anyone else, use Trello or SmartSheet. As a manager, if you are not leveraging software to track employee actions, then that is on you because the opportunities are everywhere for ensuring your team members keep their commitments.

And if the “big brother” aspect of commitment concerns you, remember that the increasing demand among today’s workers for flexibility (and not just millennials, who take the blame for everything) is a huge balancing factor for an MBO approach.
Being remote-first makes it possible for companies to be serious about providing real work-life balance, which so many start-ups tend to ignore (if not scorn outright). Some employees want to spend less time commuting and more time with their families and friends.

Wasting an hour or two each day just so they can be seen at the office doesn’t really add value for anyone – the employee or the company. Then there are the parents with sick kids or a team to coach, or the employees with spouses or partners who need to be in a particular city for their work.

**The third requirement is culture. Culture doesn’t just happen on its own – you have to work at it.**

![Image via Getty Images / jossnatu](Image via Getty Images / jossnatu)

We recognize that face-to-face interaction in the real world is still an important part of building our corporate culture, which is why we have a dedicated culture officer to define and reinforce interactions.

At Seeq we have developed a variety of ways to build trust, reinforce positive social bonds and keep employees engaged. In May we had our 4th annual all-team meeting where everyone gets together for company, team, and ad hoc interactions (game night!). This is an opportunity to meet the people we’ve known for months and
work with every day and work on defining the expectations for how we work together.

We also have remote-first meetings for everything from Halloween parties to baby showers to book clubs. And daily we have “Sharing Time” which is where one person spends 15 minutes presenting a topic of interest in their non-work life.

Sure, it’s easy to mock sharing time as show-and-tell from elementary school, but the effect is real. As a result of sharing time, Seeq employees agree they know more about their distributed co-workers than they did about collocated workers at previous jobs. The impedance and formality of offices, floors, and buildings simply isn’t there in a remote-first org, which lends itself to more open and interactive communications.

And when the software offerings to support our culture are not quite enough for remote-first work then we innovate. For example, we invested our own resources to develop “Qube,” which is remote-first office software to provide office context — who’s talking to who, who’s out of the office, who is busy, and who just stepped out to lunch. Qube integrates with Slack and Zoom to provide an effective remote-first office experience, enabling employees to pop in for face-to-face chats just as easily as if they were in the same physical space.

**Beyond the 3 C’s: Perfecting remote-first work**

*Image via Getty Images / PayPau*

While our team is fully committed to a remote-first model, we are mindful of its potential limits.
I recently participated in a university study on remote-first employment and discussed some of its limitations. For example, while we have adopted ideas like a culture officer plus online events and activities to reinforce interactions, there is no app for culture – you must invest in employee relationships to cultivate shared norms. So the annual meeting of all employees with occasional offsites to focus on specific topics are important commitments to success.

For remote-first companies like Seeq where everyone is somewhere else, the defining of expectations is particularly important. A remote-first company can leave gaps at the edges of interpersonal engagements. For example, there can be a tendency to agree too easily because we don’t fully understand each other. In addition, it can be all too easy to bury legitimate disagreements that require resolution, so we focus on closing out issues clearly to compensate. So as with Qube, if we see a gap then we innovate to address it.

In summary, the requirement for remote-first work – the 3 C’s of success – may scare some entrepreneurs and startup CEOs. But if they balance the remote-first model against the reality on the ground (employees are already remote-first to some degree) and higher employee job satisfaction, they may be opting for a better outcome.

For Seeq, being remote-first was an easy decision to make, and it is now part of our DNA as a company. We’re committed to learning how to improve the remote-first experience – and we will continue to evolve as new collaboration tools come online.

For startups in the future, perhaps even a majority of them, being remote-first may be their most effective model for success, too.

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