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IWD 2023: Local Lessons About Driving Global Success

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By Kate Massey, Head of APAC, Searchspring

Isolation, loneliness, lack of motivation, and a feeling that you don't belong. These are some of the issues with working from home which many have faced - particularly over the last few years. As the first 'feet on the ground' in APAC (Asia-Pacific) for a global technology company with its headquarters in San Antonio, Texas, I was very much aware of being over 13,500km away from my colleagues. However, I never looked at this as a disadvantage. Instead, it was an opportunity to bring a unique perspective, collaborate closely, and turn the physical divide into a cooperative strength. This perspective became even more valuable as I grew my team, working alongside me, albeit from different locations around Australia. Here are some of the lessons about remote leadership that I've learned along the way.

Recruiting for Remote-First Teams

When recruiting a primarily remote team, clear guidelines around how to work must be set. Employees need to know the expectations. At the same time, opportunities for open dialogue are also essential. The recruitment process is not a one-way street; it's a meeting of the minds to uncover how both parties can effectively provide value and set roles up for success. Clarity and effective communication in the recruitment stage ensures the right people are in the right place.

Managing Remote Teams

When working remotely, you cannot simply swivel your chair and ask questions of colleagues. Communication is, therefore, vital. For example, I bring my team into weekly "sync" video meetings to share their top three highlights from the previous week and top three priorities for the week ahead. In these meetings, progress check-ins detail progress towards targets, company-wide cascading messages and updates are shared, and action items keep the focus on future goals. It's also a forum to raise any items of things that are holding us back or roadblocks that we need to solve as a team.

Weekly "1-2-1" meetings also allow each person to speak candidly with me, ask questions, and check in with each other in a less formal setting.

Of course, technology also plays an essential role. Video calls, emails, and instant messaging systems help us stay connected - no matter where we are located.

Driving a Strong Sense of Culture

I'm extremely fortunate to be supported by a tenacious, hardworking team of savvy eCommerce industry professionals. So celebrating their (and our combined) successes brings a welcome opportunity for face-to-face and other company events. A recent highlight was bringing my team together to Cockatoo Island in Sydney. Two full days of strategy, brainstorming, and presentations from each team member enabled us all to understand how we can support one another and continue the incredible success we've seen thus far. Of course, it also brought a chance to take everyone out of their comfort zones, particularly with a night of "glamping" (camping with a little extra glamour) between strategy days.

Everyone in my team knows they are integral to growing our regional footprint in APAC. With strong communication, recognition of efforts, and celebration of everything the team has achieved, our culture is never forced and develops organically. This method is undoubtedly the strongest way to drive authentic, lasting culture.

Breaking Down Barriers to Build the Future

Another offsite event saw us coming together in an AirBnB for several days, turning it into a temporary headquarters in Sydney. A heavy focus was placed on each person's role and responsibilities, their highlights, goals, obstacles, and opportunities. This approach saw us talking openly and breaking down barriers to gain an even deeper understanding of everyone's day-to-day activities. These sessions were also pivotal in seeing people articulate and share their passions - for their roles, the team environment, and the culture we are building together.

From a broader company perspective, we strive to keep everyone connected and feeling included. Quarterly global "MVP" (Most Valuable Player) awards, for example, create excitement within the teams and have already seen several APAC team members recognised at a global company level.

Highlights, ideas, and information are shared frequently on Slack, our instant messaging system, people connect for virtual coffee catch-ups (drawn at random each month) to help build relationships and get to know team members and the roles that are doing across the business, and everyone is included in the wider team and monthly "All Hands" meetings driven from our head office in the U.S.

It may sound like significant work to implement these (and many more) of our culture-focused initiatives. It is, however, pivotal in enabling us to keep building the future together - regardless of the physical distances between us.

Applying Local Lessons to Global Growth Strategy

I'm incredibly proud of the rapid growth of our APAC region. What began as a humble original install base now supports over 160 leading and emerging retail brands in APAC and has driven a 434% growth rate in the first two years in-region.

However, with a lean, high-output team, keeping engagement and culture on track is vital. One measurement of this is my team's hyper-responsive and clear communication, which is often remarked on by customers and industry peers. The glowing commentary I regularly receive is a testament to the deep understanding and respect of each other and for our company, driven by our culture.

It is also critical to recognise our extended, global team in supporting the impressive results we have collectively achieved. Regardless of time zones, they are always willing to help. Everyone, whether working remotely from various

countries or in an office environment at our headquarters or dedicated regional U.S. offices, shares a commonality of always striving for success - for ourselves and our colleagues, our industry partners, and our customers.

In short, some of the greatest lessons I've learned about remote leadership come down to three things: communication, connection, and culture. The focus on these elements starts from recruitment, is reflected in our high-performance, high-output teams across the globe, and has resulted in incredible regional and global success that will only grow stronger from here.

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