Using freelancers in the programming world – Challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the industry has opened its gates to use of global resource pool, more than a decade ago, I have been wondering when would we embrace widely the concept of using freelancers in the programming area. Industry has been using freelancers in the areas of clinical, statistical and scientific communications for some time. Even though it may not be wide spread, but the idea of using freelancers in these areas was given an ear and same can't be said about programming freelancing usage. But again, there are many challenges in using temporary work force whether it is onsite/offsite contractors or staff augmentation models and using freelancing resource options on top of these challenges can be more difficult one to navigate. At the same time, when industry is spending lot of time in recruiting, training and retaining top talent of programmers, every resourcing option should be on the table. Author would like to provide approaches and areas of services that could use freelancer's services more effectively and would provide frame work to make this model a sustainable one.

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations still have concerns about building work force that is remote but industry has adopted well to this concept even though this idea had, still may have, opposition and resistance. The investments in technology infrastructure, resource pressure as well as cost pressures, breathed fresh air and made it a sustainable resourcing model. Organization are no longer concerned about time zones, language barriers, lack of personal touch & interaction when hiring staff but only focused on talent. The focus on hiring talented resources, irrespective of where they are located, has expanded the work force to support the ever-increasing need for resources.

Based on summarized Tufts report published on CenterWatch weekly online magazine, during 2018 Pharma organizations outsourced about 30 billion dollars of project work to CROs and it is an increase of 17% from 2017. Annually, on an average, CRO industry has seen a growth of 10% increase in their revenue due to increased outsourcing. The increased revenue % may not always translate into similar % increase in the resource needs but CROs still need to increase their pool of qualified resources. At the same time due to competition for resources, high cost of hiring & retaining resources as well as the pressure of reducing the cost of services, CRO industry is in constant pressure to evaluate their resourcing strategy.

RESOURCING APPROACHES

The common approaches I have seen in my years of experience in the CRO industry are to bring in contractors to support short term needs as well as to fill the needs before permanent staff are being hired, bringing in sub-contractors for few services where possible, offshoring and exploring the options of acquiring firms that have experienced resources. Organizations must do whatever it takes to bolster their resource strength and deliver the services to its clients, so it is not surprising to see that all options are on the table even some seem difficult to implement. Many organizations have started or acquired recruitment companies and made them part of their business divisions to give them an edge in identifying and hiring talented resources.

All the options mentioned above will give employers flexibility on bringing in talent but expected to use the resources with at least some hours per week restrictions. Depending on type of contract, onus falls on the employer to make sure sufficient work has been assigned to staff and take hit of utilization if the work planning is not done effectively. If a programmer is hired as full time or part time or as a contractor, it is

supervisor's responsibility to make sure utilization of resource is done effectively and managed correctly. The work needs to be planned to make sure that resources are used with less downtime and their office hours, vacations or out of office schedules need to be managed along with making sure that work load is optimum.

FREELANCING – HOW THIS CAN HELP RESOURCING ISSUES

Freelancing as a resourcing tool has been used by many professional service organizations for a long time. There are many reasons for using this resourcing options and changing work environment, technical infrastructure and cost implications have made it more possible to explore. IT infrastructure and faster internet connections for homes has allowed organizations to explore the remote working concepts. With this development as well as the increased cost of real estate, it is cost effective to have home-based staff than office based. At the same time, more and more employees are interested and choosing organizations that can provide this kind of flexibility. It is very difficult to attract, bring and retain all the good talent in one or more buildings.

As remote staffing solution has been in use for a decade and organizations got used to having staff working at different time zones, sometime many hours apart, employees are also using this flexibility to adapt their working hours based on their personal schedules. Many organizations are trying best to be flexible with core working hours, even though there is stress on it, as team members are spread across the regions and clearly defined work process allows this flexibility. Now the next step is to see how we can take advantage of this changing priorities of employers and employees to benefit both.

Even after all these working location and hours flexibilities, still organizations are struggling to hire and retain talent and requirement is outpacing the available resource pool. At the same time, many members are dropping off the resource pool due to struggle to balance work and life priorities, health conditions that make them unable to work for long hours and career priorities. Sometimes the pressure of hiring staff that work in the core working hours to support client teams leaves few options for employers.

Pharma & CRO industry always looked at the Silicon Valley to adopt working practice as well as talent management innovations and improvements brought in by ever change and expanding IT industry. IT industries abilities to providing flexible work hours, work environment and HR practices helped Pharma & CRO industry to be a viable and attractive industry to be part of. Freelancing options would bring in the talent pool that kept itself away from industry despite having knowledge and expertise, can be part of this industry. It also bring in diverse talent into the pool to perform certain tasks without long term commitment.

FREELANCING – IS IT FOR ME? IF SO, HOW I CAN APPROACH IT?

Freelancing may not be for all organizations and not for all programmers. The choice of bringing in freelancers depends on the tasks that can be performed. Statistical programming tasks in any study are diverse and has many aspects. So not all tasks are made equal and don't need same level of expertise. Organizations need to look at their HR processes and legal implications of using & paying resources working at different regions before exploring the option of using freelancers. Global organizations may not face much challenges but if you are a niche provider and primarily providing services in a selective region, then the implications (legal and tax) of payments for work done in different regions needs to be explored. Once this hurdle is passed, the next one is figure out the best tasks that can be outsourced to freelancers. For service providers, it is a good idea to check contracts they have with clients to make sure that there are no clause(s) that prevent them from using any freelancers. Some clients require that you inform and seek approval from them if you use any non-employee or 3rd party organization to provide service to them.

Organizations can use programming freelancers to support their internal development work such as developing general macros, proprietary tools development, review of their tools, maintenance of their applications etc.… as this kind of work doesn't need outside organizations approval. Some of this work is one-time development and doesn't tie up your internal staff who may be supporting with client deliverables. Service providers look for their staff to generate revenue by working on billable tasks and any non-billable tasks can be delegated to freelancers if the delivery timelines have some flexibility. As

freelancers can perform non-high priority work, the cost of work will also be lower. At the same, where there is a flexibility, using freelancing programmers to help with lower priority study work will reduce the overall cost of the work as well as allows your key staff to concentrate on critical items. Freelance programmers can come in handy when there are seasonal spikes in the work load and hiring permanent staff of spikes of work is not cost effective.

Individuals who are looking to take up on freelancing roles need to be clear about their priorities as well as their flexibility in adapting to different requests. It is advisable that clear discussion and communication has been made regarding the working hours and durations of work. Organizations may decide on the tasks based on this information and supervisors would know when to reach and what to expect from individuals. It is also important to clear about your own skill level on programming tasks to avoid taking on tasks that you don't experience on. Unlike full time staff, there is no expectations that freelancers have to know and do all the work and mostly freelancers chose to work on limited number of tasks as they are expert in those areas. This ensures that they can provide quality and timely service and still enjoy the job satisfaction.

FREELANCING – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Every resource model has its own challenges and exciting opportunities. It could be perceived as challenging to track the pieces of work given to freelance programmers and ensure the timely delivery. Many times, supervisors may find it difficult to figure out how to distribute the work and how to compartmentalize the tasks within a chain of work. It would be a challenge for many supervisors to see the overall work into smaller pieces of tasks and determining the which tasks best fit for freelance programmers. This is not just about technical knowledge but about financial knowledge and understanding of the cost implications of using freelancing services. But if it is used effectively, can benefit organizations reduce cost as well as help in providing their key staff work/life balance.

Freelancers need to be aware of implications of taxes, health insurance costs, retirement account implications etc… before embarking on this type of working environment. But at the same, gives them freedom to choose their work and work hours. They can choose work that excites them and elevates their knowledge and less hassle of career progression planning and promotion concerns. Many like working independent and doesn't like to depend on others to complete their work. At the same time, not many organizations can provide the work opportunities due to their internal system restrictions, licensing issues and contract issues. That means sporadic work requests, non-priority work and micromanaging due to quality or lack of control concerns.

CONCLUSION

Freelancing is one of the options to tackle raising cost of hiring, cost of performing work and lack of sufficient resources at any given time. But not all regions can use this option and not all organizations are interested in exploring this option due to perceived risks to Intellectual property. Not all organizations' leadership is ready to manage the contracts, work assignments and payments and have limited experience in dealing with these issues. But I strongly believe that as more organizations adopt this model, we will see more new members coming into work pool and increase of pool of talent. As organizations exploring and investing on diverse technologies, freelancers can help in the initial stages to establish the tools, processes and trainings for others to take on later. If the model is planned correctly, industry can take advantage of untapped pool of talent and set a good platform for future resource pool.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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