Building a Team of Remote SAS® Programmers

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ABSTRACT

Virtual work arrangements have become increasingly prevalent during the last decade among SAS programmers working in pharmaceuticals and CROs, and it is set to accelerate in the coming years due to technological advancement and organizational cost benefits. There are tremendous benefits to this kind of work arrangement – for both the employer and employee. However, building and maintaining a successful virtual team is a challenging task and it involves significant efforts from the organization, management, and employee levels. For an employer, hiring an experienced SAS programmer is hard enough, and if telework has to be factored in, it makes the process even more difficult. For an employee, telework is a great incentive, but this kind of work arrangement has its own set of problems and is not suited for everyone.   In this paper, I will discuss my experience in hiring remote SAS programmers – various competencies that are vital for teleworking SAS programmers to succeed, various challenges involved in hiring teleworkers, and ways to overcome some of those challenges. I will also present from an employee's perspective, the key obstacles that may limit the success of a remote programmer, and methods to overcome them in order to become more efficient and effective teleworkers. Also, from an employee perspective, I will present the key obstacles that may limit the success of a remote programmer, and ways to overcome them and become more efficient and effective teleworkers.

INTRODUCTION

There are an increasing number of SAS programmers who are either completely home-based (telework or remote worker) or work from home on one or more days a week (telecommute). The nature of SAS programming jobs make them more conducive for teleworking since they involve more computer oriented tasks and do not quite require much face-to-face communications.   Even SAS programmers who are office-based interact with many of the study team members only via teleconferences. As a result, teleworking is more becoming the norm rather than exception among SAS programmers, as is evident from the rise in teleworking SAS programming employment opportunities in the recent years (personal observation).

Teleworking offers several advantages to the employers in terms of financial savings by reducing overhead expenses, increased recruitment and retention, and increased productivity, while offering more flexibility and better work-life balance for the employee (Lister and Harnish, 2011). The societal advantages include conservation of energy and preservation of environment.

While there are numerous advantages, building and maintaining a team of SAS programmers with individuals who are either teleworking or telecommuting, is a challenging task. As with conventional teams, there are no foolproof methods to build and maintain a team that is either fully or partially remote. However, adequate planning and support at the organization level to adopt teleworking programs, efficient management strategies and styles at the manager's level, and involving individuals with appropriate traits and working styles at the employee level – all of these constitute the building blocks in developing and maintaining successful performance of a remote team.

As with any other innovative programs, in order for the telework program to succeed in an organization, the support (in terms of policy and infrastructure) should originate at the top of the organization and not come from just the department head or managers' level. When the idea is accepted and supported from the top level, implementing it becomes an easier task. Companies that support remote teams must have a clearly documented teleworking policy in place that details the expectations for both managers and employees. They should also equip teleworkers with technology that is required to stay connected to their business.

MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Determining the suitability of an existing employee for telework is much easier when compared to hiring someone new from a remote location for a home-based position. Those employees who are self-motivated with effective communication skills and proven track record are ideal candidates if they like to telework. Determining employability of an applicant for a remote SAS programmer position is an art and requires certain skills. If the hiring process does

not involve face-to-face interviews, the task becomes even more daunting. A hiring manager will have to assess each candidate only by his/her response to each question asked, the tone, vocal cues and conversational abilities, in the absence of any non-verbal cues such as eye contact or body language. However, this can be overcome to a greater extent by conducting video-conference interviews where the facial expressions and body language of the candidate would be more visible.

The standard competencies desired by most employers of their employees apply to teleworkers as well. However, in addition to their technical skills and experience, there are some distinct traits to look for that would define a successful teleworker while interviewing potential hires for remote positions.

Communication skills - This is one of the most important traits to be successful as a remote SAS programmer and is as important as their technical skills. Teleworker should be able to effectively communicate in both oral and written forms and in a range of electronic media. Oral communication abilities could be assessed in an interview by asking many broad and open ended questions. This would encourage or compel the candidate to articulate and provide elaborate answers. The degree of clarity, cogency and completeness of their responses will help in determining whether they will be effective in communicating their thoughts and ideas and connect with other distributed team members. Interviewers should be wary of candidates who talk too much or too little, have trouble understanding your questions, give muddled responses over the phone. At the end of an interview, if the interviewer doesn't have a favorable opinion about a candidate in spite of him/her acing the technical questions asked, then the most likely reason behind it could be the candidate's inability to communicate effectively.

Remote SAS programmers should be effective in writing down their thoughts as clear, accurate and concise messages, since we rely heavily on e-mail communication, and any level of ambiguity could work against team productivity. One way of gauging their written communication skills is by reviewing their resume and cover letter – assuming that it is their individual and original work. Additionally, creating opportunities to exchange emails with the jobseeker would help in assessing their writing abilities even better.

Listening skills – Candidates who show openness and desire to understand in an interview will do well as remote SAS programmers. Paraphrasing and queries to understand the questions better during an interview are signs of their effective listening ability.

Self-motivated/Self-starter – Remote SAS programmers should be able to work independently and complete assigned task with minimal supervision. While it is difficult to determine these traits during a telephone interview, a skilled interviewer can certainly pick up cues by asking the right questions. Further probing, to gather more details, can be accomplished by asking follow-on questions such as "what was the most exciting part of your current job" or "what motivates you". The candidate should provide response that clearly demonstrates high level of initiative and self-motivation with appropriate examples. The interviewer should be able to deduce to what level the candidate is passionate about the work that he/she does. People sometimes move into this profession only for the benefit of teleworking or being home-based, and such employees cannot keep themselves motivated in the long term, unless they are genuinely interested in the work that they are doing.

Time Management Skills – Teleworkers should be able to effectively establish and manage their own routine. Individuals who are not good at planning and prioritizing their work are not good candidates for teleworking. Interviewer could present a relevant typical time crunch situation to the candidate and ask them how they would handle it efficiently.

Reliability – Developing and maintaining trust is very important for a teleworker and one way to build trust is through demonstrating reliability. They should fulfill their commitments so that they could be trusted to produce consistent and reliable results. In addition to asking relevant questions in an interview, if company policy permits, inquiries about the quality of work and ability to meet deadlines should be made with the former employers of candidates.

Honesty and Integrity – Remote SAS programmers should maintain a high standard of honesty and integrity. An effective interviewer can uncover a candidates' questionable behavior or lack of integrity in their past jobs by asking questions during the interview that would bring out responses with examples on how they have handled various ethical situations in the past. Resumes should be scrutinized with great care prior to an interview with an eye for equivocality and inconsistencies. Any discrepancies observed should be brought up during the interview for further

clarification. When candidates misrepresent themselves in their resume or during interviews, they are tell-tale signs of their integrity, or lack thereof, and personalities.

Resourcefulness – Teleworkers should be able to develop their own plan of attack and come up with creative solutions when faced with problems. They should be technologically savy, more adaptable to changing technology and should have a strong learning attitude. Candidate who exhibits resistance to adopt newer technology might not be a good candidate for a remote SAS programmer position.

Screening candidates for the right soft-skills is very crucial while hiring a teleworker. In spite of doing a thorough search and following all the rules, hiring managers could be easily misled by the impeccable resume, extensive relevant experience, great interview skills, etc. only to realize in a few weeks after hiring that they did not hire the right candidate for the position. A wrong hiring decision could cost the company a lot of time and money. These are some of the suggestions which help improve the chance of hiring the right teleworker.

- While interviewing someone from a remote location, consider conducting a virtual interview using video conferencing tools, which much more closely resemble a face-to-face interview experience than a phone conversation. Body language and non-verbal cues that could help assess the candidate better will not be missed.
- Try out a potential employee first on a contract basis and once they prove themselves as a good long-term fit for the company, bring them in as a permanent employee.
- Whenever possible let the candidate start in an office-based setup and then move on to become home-based once they proved their abilities.
- Avoid hiring teleworkers for filling in junior level positions. They might need a lot of guidance and mentoring up front and therefore may not be as effective, working in isolation from a remote location.
- Select candidates with prior teleworking or telecommuting experience. Those who have had at least 2-3 days of teleworking for 1-2 years would have mastered this type of work arrangement and will not have to go through a steep learning curve.
- As with any positions, referrals by current staff or from someone in the industry are always a good source for finding potential candidates for teleworker positions. Ensure that the same hiring processes are followed before hiring the potential prospect.
- Pressure to fill positions in a short period of time could result in poor hiring decisions. Take enough time to screen and evaluate the candidates before hiring.
- Let existing teleworking staff also interview potential candidates. They may be able to better evaluate the competencies that are most crucial to be successful for teleworking setup.
- If company policy permits, references may be asked, that could talk about past performance and experience in similar teleworking scenarios, and the references should be checked. Lack of credible references should raise red flags. Also, in some cases, the candidates' prior work experience could be verified online.
- Good teleworker should be able to provide quick and attentive responses when asked for information. If the candidate takes longer to respond to phone calls or emails during screening process, then that person might not be a good fit.
- Candidate selection process should be a group effort involving 3-4 individuals and should never be a solo effort. Sharing and comparing notes among the interviewers after the interview is a crucial step and will bring in multiple perspectives which can help in making better hiring decisions. Also, ethical behavior could be better evaluated by a consensus decision among several knowledgeable managers or seasoned programmers.

After hiring the communicative, confident and independent teleworker, provide them with proper equipment, training and guidance to get them up to speed, establish clear expectations and goals and adopt a result-oriented management approach to effectively manage a teleworker. Schoemperlen (2011) addressed these various aspects in detail in her presentation.

EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

Telework setup offers many benefits and is considered as the greatest blessing by many employees primarily because of the freedom it offers. However, it is not suited for everyone. Even though the job requirements and responsibilities are same, people who are teleworkers require different personalities and skills and they face different challenges when compared to their office-based counterparts.

Ideal character traits for a successful teleworker include self-discipline and motivation, flexibility, excellent communication skills, being technologically competent, results-oriented and independent (Busch et al., 2011). Those who fit into this profile are well-equipped to handle the challenges of a telework setup. Even with these ideal set of character traits many of the teleworkers might find it hard to make it work. The following are some of the tips that would help in becoming an effective teleworker.

Establish ground rules – Expectations from the employer should be clearly defined in the beginning, such as key responsibilities, working hours, preferred communication method and turnaround times, performance assessment, etc. Establishing and adhering to the ground rules will increase the productivity of teleworkers.

Communicate – Communication is vital to be successful as a teleworker. Establishing a steady stream of communication will reassure other team members that teleworkers are just as busy and effective in spite of being away from the office location and also avoid often baseless accusations of under working. It also helps to cultivate the trust required for a telework program to be successful. The manager and the team should be kept updated continually about the current project status, progress made, issues encountered, follow-ups, etc. Emails should be short and to the point, need to be answered swiftly, and if they require more time to be acted upon, the sender should be apprised of the anticipated wait time. Likewise, telephone communication should not be too long and drawn out. In the interest of promoting productivity for all those involved, they should be kept brief, and focused on the topic.

Stay Connected –Be transparent and keep others informed. Communicate to the team members about availability during normal working hours. Extended periods of inactivity on Instant Messenger (IM), or not returning missed phone calls within a short period of time will raise questions among managers and other team members. It is acceptable to step out for a doctor appointment or a school event during the day while working from home as long as the rest of the team members are made aware of the unavailability through IM status messages or emails.

Workspace – It is very important to identify a designated workspace at home – any space that is quiet and free from distractions. This enables one to switch to, and stay put in the work mode, while physically still at home. Insufficient workspace at home has a negative effect on productivity (Busch et al. 2011). Workspace should be setup ergonomically - eyestrain from bad lighting or back pain from sitting on a wrong chair could affect productivity

Establish Office Hours – Flexibility is one of the major benefits of working from home – but that does not indicate that teleworkers can follow different work schedules each day. A consistent work schedule, including breaks should be established and maintained. This will let team members know about the availability of the teleworker, and when they can be contacted. It also lets family members at home know when they ought not to be interrupted. Also, established work hours lets one stay focused and increase efficiency. If the company has established business core hours for employees then teleworkers should adhere to that policy and be available and working during those hours.

Work ethics – Teleworkers are expected to have robust work ethics and employers rely on teleworkers to be trustworthy and conscientious about following the rules. Due to the nature of this type of work set-up, it takes longer to develop trust. Teleworkers can develop this type of task-based trust only by being honest, responsive, following through on commitments and taking responsibility for results. Teleworkers should never misuse this privilege and consider this type of work arrangement as an alternative for child care or taking care of the elderly.

Telework arrangement does have a lot of advantages and is being considered as a great incentive by many employees. However, it is important to understand that not everything about telework setup is good – some consider this as a double-edged sword. There are several challenges for this type of work arrangement and a teleworker should be equipped to handle in order to be effective.

Isolation – Working remotely could be isolating both personally and professionally.

Personal isolation could peak when the teleworker starts feeling a sense of disconnect between them and the other team members working on-site due to absence of face-to-face interactions, and in some cases this teleworking blues could be hard to overcome. Sharing workload among workers located at different time zones can compound this sense of isolation. One way to combat this feeling is by visiting the office (if possible) to reconnect with team members, get introduced to new face, and arrange to have meeting/ lunch with them. Also, managers could help alleviate this to a greater extent by communicating regularly with teleworkers and make them feel part of the team. It

is easier for team members to connect if they are located on similar time zones and managers should consider this aspect while putting together project teams.

Professional isolation could stem from remote employee's concern that they may be excluded from developmental opportunities that are available for their on-site counterparts. This can be greatly overcome by being more proactive and maintaining high visibility at the team and department level. Teleworkers should communicate regularly with the management about individual goals and interests so that they are considered when opportunities arise. Management would also have to make it clear that any considerations for career advancement is based solely on performance and not based on location. Also, whenever possible, managers should approve 1-2 office visits for teleworkers so that they could fly in and get some face time to catch up with other colleagues. Getting face time with other co-workers is a good antidote for both personal and professional isolation.

Work-life Balance – There are several benefits of telework set up that are beneficial for an employee's personal life. However, there are a few downsides to an employee's personal work-life balance as well. There are many findings in business literature (Dubrin & Barnard, 1993, Riley & McCloskey, 1997) that clearly indicate that teleworkers tend to work longer hours at home. These additional hours of work could lead to burnout and eventually could cause a decrease in efficiency and the quality of work. One of the reasons for overworking is the employees feeling the need to prove to their manager and other team members that they are working hard while not at an office site. Maintaining regular work hours and finishing up assigned task efficiently and timely could build trust and reduces the need to prove constantly. Lack of separation between professional and personal life is another factor that leads to overworking. This could be overcome by setting clear physical boundaries that defines work and home, setting up rituals that clearly defines start and end of work time. Pre-work rituals could be anything such as taking a shower or dropping off kids at the bus stop, and they signal the start of work hours and leaving house behind. Similarly an end of the work day routine could be as simple as shutting the office door or shutting down the work computer.

System issues – At times systems or applications may not work, become slow, or may encounter other kinds of glitches. This could leave the teleworker helpless and unable to finish up the assigned task within agreed upon timelines. Teleworkers should have some technical knowledge to resolve issues on their own or be able to explain some of these basic issues to help desk or other team members who could help in resolving them. They should not only have the patience to ride that out but should also be willing to catch up for the lost time later during the day. Also, if the teleworkers are located at a commutable distance from the office, it would be a good opportunity to go to the office on days when it is hard to connect to the server from remote location.

CONCLUSION

Telework arrangements offer great benefits for both the employer and employee and they are likely to become more prevalent with advancement in technology. It is certainly a privilege for the right kind of employee with personality traits that suits this type of work setup. Building an effective team of remote SAS programmers is a challenging task and its success rests on the hands of both the employer and employee. Failure to assess the candidate's ability or potential to work efficiently from a remote set up will result in lost productivity and high employee turnover. In such situations, companies need to correct their weaknesses in identifying and managing teleworkers by providing proper training to their managers which would help in making this type of work arrangement successful.

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