



By April Bonner, CPP

How One Packaging Engineer Solved Remote-work Obstacles

A typical and more ideal way of working is “in-office.” When working in a cross-functional project team, it is easier to work with the different functional teams when you are able to see them every day. If there is an issue or if you need to simply ask a question, you could just walk to the person’s desk for a quick resolution. Working on a remote team is very different from an “in-office” environment and requires more communication and other soft skills to have a successful project.

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Since 2017, I had been working remotely on a project where the entire cross-functional team—except for me—was in one central location. Just by habit, I initially was approaching this project just as I would if it were an “in-office” or non-remote project environment. I learned quickly that I had to change my approach. Here, I am going to explain some of the issues and situations I faced and what I did to overcome them.

Early on in the project, one issue I faced was my team members not fully trusting me. Since this was a remote project, it is hard to develop meaningful relationships with team members. As a packaging engineer, one of my daily tasks is to work with product development so I can develop the best possible packaging system for the product. The problem was that the team was fighting against me on what packaging to use. As the subject matter expert, this was very frustrating for me. In order for us to be successful, I knew I had to do something to win my team’s trust.

Two-step approach

First, I started to take frequent trips to their physical location to meet the team face-to-face and develop those relationships. My manager encouraged me to take as many trips as possible because he also knew the importance of building relationships within a remote project team. Second, it was important to respectfully inform the team who the packaging subject matter expert is—me! Before their former company was acquired by my company, the team was accustomed to outsourcing packaging, and they were responsible for

all the packaging design inputs to give to the third-party vendor. Once I had those conversations with the team and frequently visited the site, things were a lot better.

Another issue I was facing throughout the project was communication. I quickly realized that email communication was not going to cut it for this project. Not hearing from my team for days was not always a good thing and there was always a chance for miscommunication. For example, I had not heard from anyone on my team in a couple of days waiting to receive information on how to proceed on a task. As it turns out, they were waiting on me to complete the task. So, days went by, and the task had not been worked on.

Another factor is that it’s hard to read tone through email, and that makes it difficult to understand exactly what my team members are trying to say. The simple solution is to pick up the phone and talk with your team members. So much was resolved when I actually called my team to get an understanding of tasks and responsibilities. This solution was hard for me because I am a little shy; making a phone call was not always my first choice. My manager, however, explained how important dialing out was for this project. I am grateful to have overcome my shyness because calling my team members was the best thing to help get the project launched.

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In summary, if you are working on, or will work on, a team remotely, it is important to develop good communication skills. I recommend that you establish meaningful relationships early on in the project by meeting the team face-to-face at the site and also getting together outside of work. This will help you get to know your team personally. Having a good rapport with your team is vital for project success. I also recommend making calls or setting up a verbal meeting with your team members as your first line of communication. Effective communication when working in a remote environment is very important. It reduces confusion on tasks and any issues can be resolved quickly. Implementing these skills has resulted in great relationships and continued project success. **PW**

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