

WMF Remote Worker Experience

Project partners:

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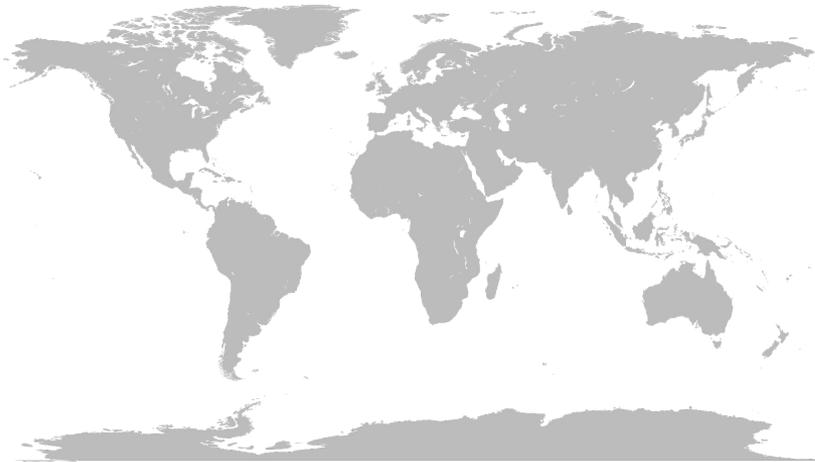
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2014-2019: remote work saw **44% growth**¹ in the U.S.

63% of companies have remote workers

57% lack work-from-home policies

[\(survey of 1,005 workforce hiring decision makers, 2017\)](#)



World Map by Wikimedia Commons user Phirosiberia

¹ U.S. Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics data analyzed by Global Workplace Analytics and [Flexjobs](#). "Remote" is defined as, "non-self-employed people who principally work from home at least half-time." Freelancers, business owners, and other entrepreneurs not included.

248

WMF staff with office listed as remote in Namely

385

Total WMF staff

WMF staff is currently **64%** remote



² Thanks to Cara Palanca for helping to retrieve these numbers.

Research questions

1. What **challenges** do WMF remote workers face, and do these differ between US and non-US based employees?
2. What do remote workers **appreciate** about their work situations?
3. What **best practices and hacks** have remote workers developed in response to their situations?

4. What **opportunities exist for the WMF** in terms of improving working conditions for remote workers? *How can WMF become a leader in this space?*
5. What do remote workers **wish others at the foundation knew?**

Process

- Face-to-face and by-video interviews
- Open-ended questions, with audio recordings
- Sampled to roughly represent general global distribution of remote staff
- Recordings transcribed and data anonymized
- Transcribed interviews coded and analyzed, with regular check-ins and initial measure of inter-rater reliability

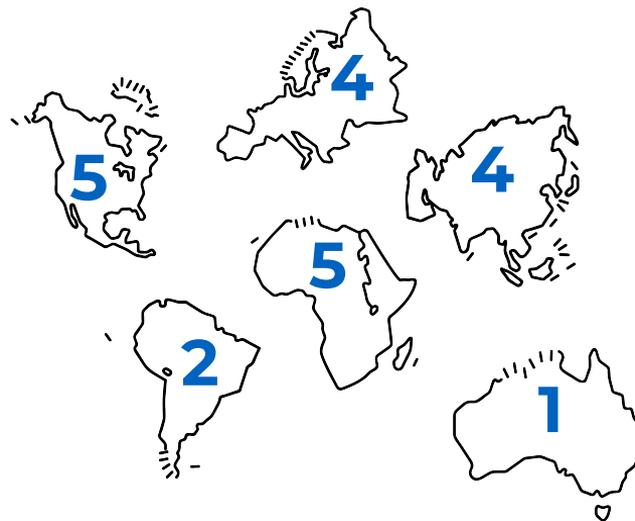
“Remote, remoteness doesn’t happen. You have to design for it.”

-Participant 11, current study

Participants

(n=21), overview:

- United States (5), outside US (16)
- [Human development classification:](#)¹
Very high (10), high (7), medium (3), low (1)
- Urban (18), rural (3)
- Time zones (UTC): 0, -3, -4, -5, +1, +2, +3, +5, +7, +8

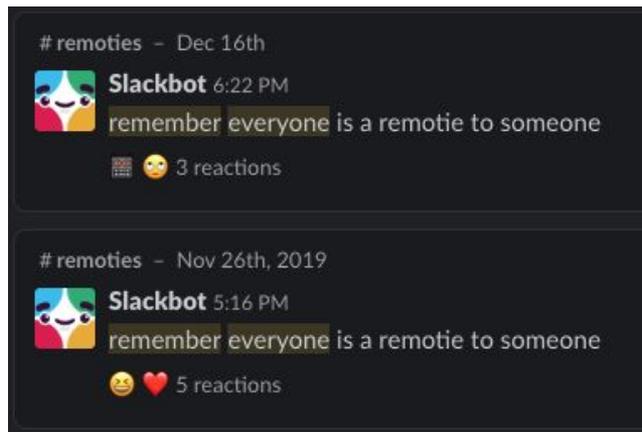


¹ [United Nations Human Development Index](#). Indicators are life expectancy at birth, years of schooling, GNI.

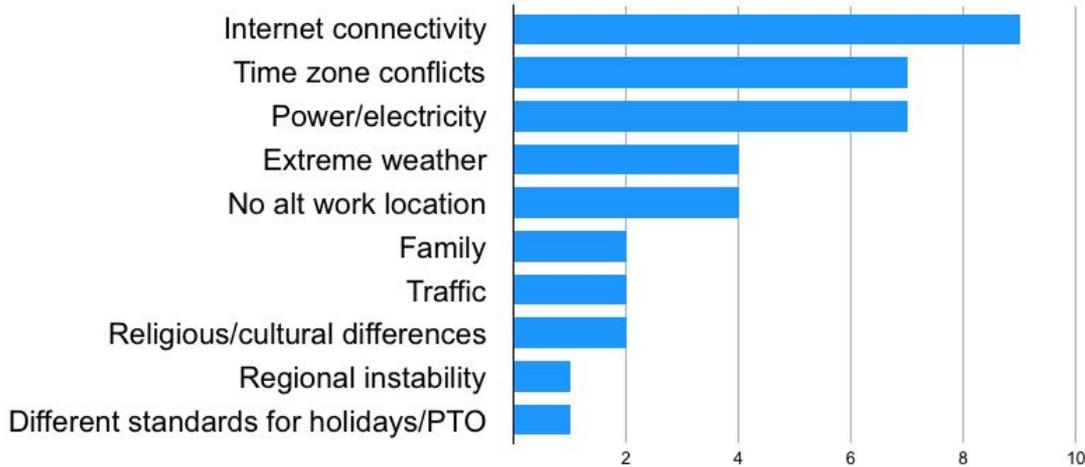
(Numbers reflect number of staff per region interviewed)

Limitations & next steps

- Today we present initial trends and patterns, but these data bring the most value in terms of their *richness*, not breadth
- These data have been used to inform a broader survey used to increase sample size (carried out by Operations Team)
- Future work should also consider non-remote -- remote worker interactions, as well as SF-based remote experience (per our friendly Slackbot reminder → → →)



What about the place you live impacts your day-to-day work?



- Internet connectivity, time zone conflicts, and power/electricity issues are noted by participants from in/outside the US, as well as those from countries from all HDI categories.
- Delayed work is a commonly noted effect of these challenges.



“I had them install fiber lines in my neighborhood. ...Weeks and weeks of lobbying and actually going to the CEO of the mobile operator here” [Participant_4, Internet connectivity]

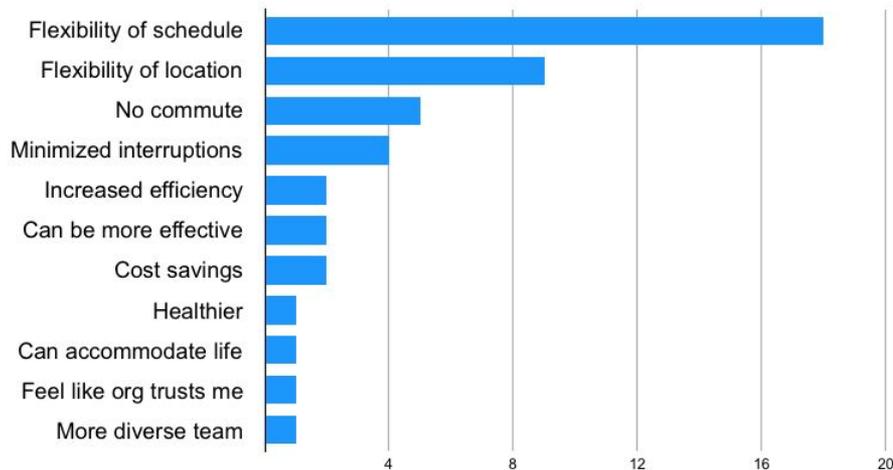
“I experience power failures regularly and that’s sometimes impacts my activity because I have to adjust my calendar to the fact that I lose power and if I lose power something that had to do right now needs to be pushed and resumed later” [P_6, Power outages]

“It’s hard to tell my kids that I’m at the office because I’m still in the house” [P_11, Family]

“So there are times when it’s like cramming into late in the evening depending on the meetings I have also with SF, I have one day that I dedicate to meetings for that go beyond 7pm my time”

[P_11, Time zones]

What are the things you most appreciate about working remotely?



- 'No commute' was more frequently mentioned by US remote workers than non-US participants
- Flexibility of one or more types was noted by nearly every participant

FLEXIBILITY MATTERS A LOT

“I like to work odd hours from time to time, and I’m able to do that. Not under the scrutiny of others”

[P_9]

“Working remotely allows me to take you know, those two hours of lunch break later than the normal lunch break office hours in like a regular, you know, strict kind of office [...] make up for those hours by either starting work earlier or finishing work later”

[P_2]

But, flexibility brings a variety of benefits...

“Being able to also switch sometimes, I can start earlier like if I have some stuff to do some personal activities or engagement in the afternoon, I sometimes can start way earlier in the morning and be able to resume work later in that ability to adjust to organize things as I see fit is really valuable as it makes me more available for my family and able to quickly react to personal challenges...” [P_9, **Accommodating Life**]

“I’m in a time zone that’s more appropriate for quick chats with a lot of volunteers who need to reach out to me via chat channels” [P_3, **Effectiveness**]

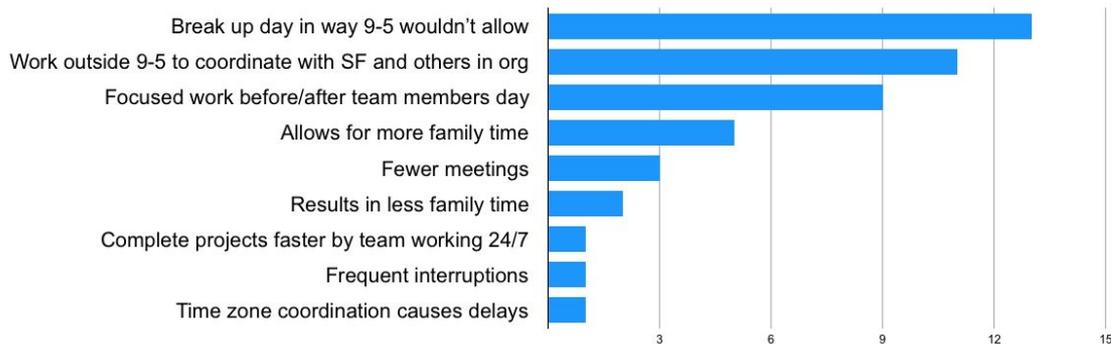
“Groups of hours, where you’re actually working, and those would be like very highly productive phases during the day. And you can probably accomplish several types of work like maybe one is for quiet time working and others for like meetings and discussions, another could be something else altogether”

[P_19, **Minimized interruptions, increased efficiency**]

“I appreciate that I can have a very diverse team that has incredibly different cultural perspectives”

[P_15, **Diversity**]

Features of a typical day



- The top 2 themes were present in both US and non-US participant responses
- 'Focused work before/after team members day' did not arise among US participant answers
- Flexibility of schedule isn't only important for personal reasons, but for helping remote workers get work done across time zones

FLEXIBILITY IS BOTH PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

"I can comfortably take my children to school, come back. I'm able to spend more time with them than I did before when I had a 9-5"

[P_18, Flexibility and personal life]

"And then around 8:30pm, that's dinner time and then once you have had dinner, it's like completely, you know, a high energy stuff because all those San Francisco meetings happen at that time"

[P_19, Flexibility and work life]

More themes related to the features of a typical day

“I have three hours that I can just get work done. It’s quiet. Everyone in California is not online yet”

[P_10, **Focused work**]

“I think that I’m lucky not to be in the same time zone because I have to keep the meeting time to a minimum” [P_11, **Fewer meetings**]

“So, but only 1 day a week to do meetings at 1am”

[P_16, **Work (very far) outside 9-5**]

“Schedules are kind of crazy. So we compromise in a way that we have our team meetings in a very early morning time for me because I am a morning person so I like starting early” [P_2, **Work outside 9-5**]

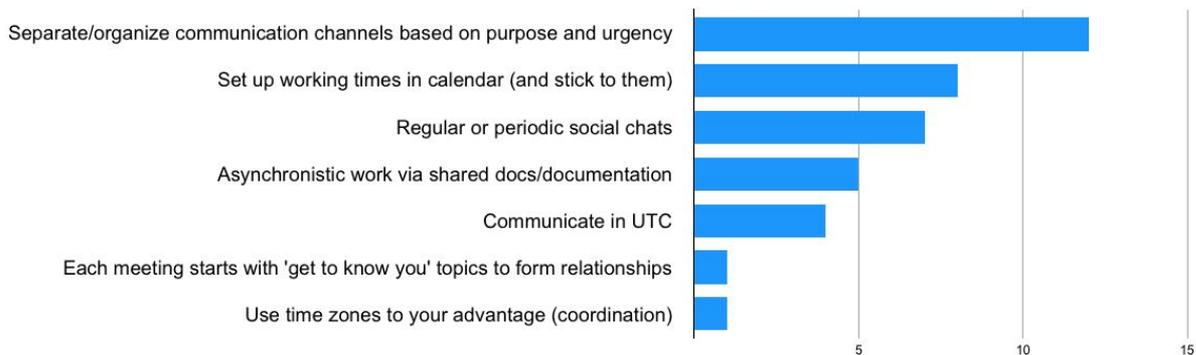
“When I open my inbox at 9am my time, and it’s something urgent that needs to be fixed, and I have no developer available until 6pm”

[P_2, **Time zones and delays**]

“Very often I have found that the time zone difference between me and some of my colleagues, especially some of the people in my own team, it really helps. Like when they are sleeping, I am working, I am cracking on with work, and vice versa, right”

[P_17, **Project completion time**]

Hacks, workarounds, or special processes for remote work



- A wide range of items came up, but after initial coding, most could be grouped into these broader categories, many related to either **communication practices** or clearly defined working hours and calendars
- About the same time we were reviewing interview data, a *foundation-official* message announced the *#welcomesandtransitions* Slack channel. Over 2 days, the email thread grew to nearly 40 responses, similarly revealing opportunity that exists at the foundation.



“So we have this rule where we do not expect each other to return an email unless it’s clearly marked in a certain way in the subject”

[P_8]

“Every team meeting we start off with, like a get to know you question. And, you know, we, we learn more about each other as humans...”

[P_15]

“We have our chats where we have decided to have different chats, depending on the level of emergency”

[P_12]

“I wish that other people in the foundation knew the power of keeping their calendars up-to-date”

[P_9]

Other emotions & challenges

Mentioned by 5+ participants:

1. Schedules revolving around SF meeting times, and a feeling of US-centricity
2. Hard time feeling connected to work due to remoteness/Isolation/Loneliness
3. FOMO

Others:

- Inability to decline odd hour meetings due to power differences
- Lots of cognitive space dedicated to planning for internet/power consistency
- Having to develop lots of self-discipline for working remote
- Job burnout due to late-night meetings
- Among others...

“I’ve heard stories of people who say, ‘We’ll, I can’t be a manager because I’m remote,’ and I think that’s a problem” [P_11]

“It’s like, I’ve got people Slacking me and GChatting me and WhatsApping me and texting me. And so I’m just like, always afraid I’m going to miss something” [P_10]

“I think it would make us feel a bit more heard, and it would make us, it would make us feel that you guys are, you know, SF feels the pain, you know...” [P_17]

“You’re isolated, isolated, and sometimes you just wish to have people who just yea, just we would just ask how you feel...” [P_12]

Other suggestions...

Top 4 by frequency of mention:

1. **Activities and ways for remote workers (and all employees) to bond/connect**
2. **Co-working, initial set-up, and internet stipends**
3. **Ways for team members to share timezone burdens and compromise**
4. **More standardized/formalized processes for remote work/coordination**

“Sometimes it’s really hard when someone tells you, ‘hey, you have to have a meeting from 7-8,’ and I’m like, ‘OK, well you don’t have a choice, right?’ Or I feel I don’t have a choice” [P_11]

“Your work morale is tied in part to your ability to trust people around you and if you don’t have that [because you’re remote] then you start to drift away/leave the org” [P_13]

“You know, the foundation is making that provision [internet service] to office people, they should be willing to make that provision for remote people, too” [P_17]

“I feel like there’s more scope for interacting with people better” [P_5]

Is there anything you wish others in the foundation knew that would make it easier for you to work with them?

- **Top 2** themes (by frequency of mention):
 - **I'm in a different timezone** (nearly 50% of participants)
 - **Design for remoteness (intentionality/deliberateness)**
- Others responses included: Be aware of start/stop times, Keep your calendar up-to-date, Want others to better understand my work/team/job function better, Less SF-centric meeting times, clear expectations about when others are open to meetings
- **Communication** was a common thread through some of these responses, including reference to standardized communication channels
- The top 2 themes came up among both US and non-US participants



SAN FRANCISCO-CENTRICITY AND LONG HOURS

"I struggle with often is to understand what is the outside of office hours that SF-based people can open to in terms of meetings and stuff"

[P_19]

"And like once in a while, I would appreciate it if SF was inconvenienced. And then somebody else on the other side of the world, you know, enjoys a meeting within regular business hours rather than you know, in the evening"

[P_17]

"I'd say the other piece is that you work late, like I work really long hours, I'll start in the morning, and then I'll go till 6:30pm"

[P_10]

Summary & Opportunities

Commonalities exist among **challenges and experiences** among remote workers at WMF. As such, with focused effort and resources, the **foundation has the opportunity to positively impact** these remote worker experiences.

At the end of the day, **better employee outcomes are better WMF mission outcomes.**

e.g. Flexibility allows employees to better accommodate personal/family life. It also allows them to be more focused, more effective, and coordinate better with a more diverse organization.



(Extracted from 'Set Knowledge Free mural' by Tomi Um, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Advancing our Distributed Culture

We seek to better understand the **benefits and challenges** that come with **remote work**.

Our **experiences** are both **similar** and individually **unique**.

By performing a Foundation-wide “State of Remote Culture” assessment we will develop an **informed remote toolkit** to **empower and connect staff** within our geographically dispersed organization.

Distributed Toolkit Development

Development of guidance and recommendations in 4 key areas:

1. **Workspace**
2. **Collaboration**
3. **Connectivity**
4. **Community**

Workspace

Ergonomics

Planning

Equipping

Collaboration

File generation/sharing

Brainstorming

Testing

Messaging

Connectivity

Virtual meetings

Work management

Internet accessibility & security

Community

Team connections

Shared experiences

Special events

Group Discussion

Let's break out into pairs or small groups for 10 minutes, and then re-group to wrap up the session.

- 1.** What opportunities do you see for the WMF to support remote work?
- 2.** What do you think is an essential to consider as the WMF looks to take concrete actions to be a leader among orgs with significant amounts of remote work?

- 3.** What can we do, separate from org policies, to support remote work?
- 4.** Communication was a common thread through interviews - what ideas do you have to promote stronger connections between distributed colleagues and teammates?

THANK YOU

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Thank you to Nichole Saad, Maggie Epps, Sam Smith and the rest of Wikilead Cohort 8 for the conversations that led to this study.



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