

How we work today reimagined with Bogdan Tindeche and Vladimir Markovic

- Part 1

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SETH CLIFFORD (SC): Alright. Welcome back to the Tech Reimagined podcast. In this edition of our show, we're talking about how we've had to reimagine distributed ways of working during the current circumstances, particularly as we stay home in these really trying and difficult times. I have two colleagues with me today, two software delivery experts, Bogdan Tindeche and Vladimir Markovic. Hello, guys. How are you?

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BOGDAN TINDECHE (BT): Fine, thanks, Seth.

[00:00:33]

VLADIMIR MARKOVIC (VM): Hi, Seth

[00:00:35]

SC: Alright. So, both of you have led very large distributed teams located across numerous locations and have done so for a large number of years. Bogdan, would you like to give us a brief overview of your current role in the company?

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BT: Yeah, sure, Seth. So, I'm delivery partner in Endava, and basically, I'm responsible for Endava business relationship with the customer that I'm looking for. I'm here to help my customers to be successful and get the most from the partnership with Endava. That implies a lot of activities that we will talk a little bit about them later.

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SC: Of course. OK. And Vladimir.

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VM: Thanks, Seth. And good afternoon from Belgrade, Serbia. I'm leading our US technology group, and for our non-Endava listeners, that's sort of a business unit in Endava focused on working with the US-based technology clients. So, at the moment we have around 40 active projects with a little bit about 350 engineers involved. Seven, eight years ago, I fully moved to a dark business side. So, it's been a while since I wrote my last line of code, but I still consider myself as an engineer.

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SC: Alright. Excellent. Thank you both. So, you know, we're in a situation right now in the throes of a global pandemic that I don't think anybody really expected to have the scale and impact that it has. And, you know, we keep saying unprecedented times, unprecedented times. It's causing a rift in the way we usually do things. It's causing a lot of challenges. But it's also creating opportunities to think about how we do things differently, and how we engage with individuals and, you know, other people to get the same amount of work done, the same type of work done. But, you know, we have to do it differently. So, I mean, this is true even for our podcast right now, because usually we're inside a studio. And today we're all distributed. Now, that's typically how I've done podcasts. But, you know, being together, seeing other people, getting to read the room and feel that kind of that energy—without it, it's tough to do work sometimes. So, we're here today to talk about how we

can overcome these obstacles with our highly distributed teams and figuring out that—what are the best ways of working that we can employ right now? What are the kind of pivots that we need to make, the things that we need to change to continue doing the high level of software engineering that we do, and that, you know, that everybody does? So, there's a heavy reliance right now on the tech and the applications and the process to keep a connection with customers or, you know, providing important services. And it's—a lot of the conversation's been about tools, but there's also a serious need for a lot of companies to completely, you know, pivot what they're doing and reprioritise everything in some cases just to overcome, you know, the obstacle of being apart from one another. So, given that we're used to kind of working in a distributed way, but now having to work in a much more dispersed way as well, Vlada, how are you keeping in touch with your teams and managing the same levels of communication between everyone and maintaining productivity levels right now?

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VM: Yeah, I think there are several aspects of this current situation that should be taken into consideration when we are basically talking about distributed working as it is today. And obviously since COVID-19 situation started, like, entire world is moving toward working remotely and that's happening at a scale that never happened before. So, software industry is probably the most successful example as due to nature of our work and all the technology tools that we have been already using, we were able to move to this new, and accommodate to this new environment and fully distributed working environment relatively fast. So, for me, and personally in my engineering teams, we already worked with the customers in the US. Those customers often have teams in multiple locations and in multiple time zones. And on a typical project we work with the teams from the West Coast, East Coast, sometimes there's a team in India, sometimes our teams are distributed on multiple locations in Endava. Basically, we already lived and breathed distributed software delivery on a daily basis, which again allows us to easily move to what I believe is a fully remote and distributed delivery.

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VM: When this all started, we kind of knew that this is going to be possible and that we have the tools and processes and the experience. But we were still obviously concerned as we never did that at this scale and a majority of our engineers are still used to work from the office and to have someone right next to them who they can talk directly and as soon as they have a question or a concern or a dilemma. So, we obviously lost that human to human interaction and we now rely on technology to help us. So, I talk on a daily basis with my teams, how we can help people deal with the stressfulness of the current situation, how we can keep motivation and focus on work in this prolonged isolation. I believe that what we have today is an extreme work from home. Comparing this to the regular work from home is like comparing like light exercise to a marathon race. So, no one was fully prepared for this and there is no recipe how to manage all aspects of the situation. And companies are people and people are figuring it out along the way. And I think that we as a company are doing a great job in dealing with this. And I believe that's where company culture plays an important role. And in our case, caring for our people and for our customers is one of the core values built into our DNA. And as I said, I believe that was very helpful.

[00:06:46]

SC: Alright. Excellent response. Thank you. Bogdan, how about you? What are you doing in terms of communication and productivity with your teams?

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BT: We were working distributed from the beginning, so this didn't take us by surprise. We tend to avoid large meetings. Of course, large meetings are not productive, neither in face-to-face

meetings, but definitely are not productive in a remote environment. So, we tend to avoid this by replacing them with emails. So, internal communication with the teams or doing some all-hands, we try to limit those in, through emails so that we give the team more focus time because believe it or not, the productivity of individuals is growing through this isolation, because they have more focus time. It's not a disruption of the colleagues. It's just focus time. So that's why we try to agree, small meetings between two, three people, focus so that in the end the guys will have more focus time to deliver.

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SC: Sure. OK. You know, something is, as both of you were talking, something that I wanted to ask you about that I know has been—is a challenge for my own team right now as we start to begin new projects—is the difference between maintaining productivity in an ongoing capacity on a project on which we're already working versus kicking off a new project, right? So, can either of you speak to that? I assume your teams are already engaged, but have you launched any projects since this has started? Because I know that for us that's been, you know, a lot of challenging conversation around what kind of dynamic there's going to be when we are meeting people for the first time and establishing trust and, you know, opening lines of communication.

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BT: Yeah. So, we had the chance to start small opportunity meeting people for the first time. We applied basically the same principle that I've said before. So, on the first meeting is just the sharing the video. So, we were able to put names against faces, they could see us in our home environment. And also, I could see the customer's local environment because everybody's working from home and it gives a personal touch to this. And I think it is working better than a meeting in an office. I don't think this stops bringing in new business.

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SC: How about you, Vlad? Any thoughts?

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VM: So, I think that the companies will have to, let's say, reinvent some processes, and in order to accommodate to this new reality, another technique that can be useful if we are starting a new distributed project right now is to mix people from various location, you know, single scrum team. And I use that a lot when we are ramping new teams for new projects. For example, let's say that your project requires a team of 30 engineers and that you'll have 15 engineers on one and 15 on another location. So, instead of, let's say, building four different scrum teams—two on one and two on another location—you can build four teams, and each four of those are a mix of people from multiple locations. And I know that's against scrum best practises and typically is not recommended and most likely for a while you sacrifice team velocity and efficiency. But in the long run, you are going to build a distributed team that works as a real team. So again, once people get a chance to work with each other in the same team, that helps to create a team environment that again helps open the communication channels between people on various location. And after a while, once you feel like you made a nice progress, you can move those teams and have a single team on a single location.

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SC: Alright. Excellent. So, just changing gears a little bit, both of you lead large groups of people, large teams, lots of individuals. In terms of maintaining morale from a leadership perspective, are you doing the same kinds of things that you're doing right now? Are you doing something different? Is it the same thing with a twist? How are you handling the personalities and the need to keep people focused and motivated as well as productive?

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BT: I think in a way you can prepare for such things because I'm not a tool or process person, but it's clear for me what I'm expecting from people that I like to work with. So, I like to work with people that are independent, motivated and careful about what they are doing. And because of these qualities, and looking for these qualities, I was able to create in the last five, six years, a strong team of delivery leads that have these qualities. Together with them, I'm delivering and manage this large group of people that are in the accounts that I'm leading. They're choosing their own people to deliver. So, based on this, it's the people that we have in our teams are quite mature and we don't do anything special. Of course, we are a little bit more flexible with the working time. In Serbia now is from 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., it's lockdown. So basically, you can't go outside. So, we are fine for a—and we agree to the people working there to take time during the day, to take a walk, to do the shopping. Then when they're back to continue working after business hours. These kind of short tweaks, small tweaks will help go positive from business perspective of the people deliver. Being with the whole family all day, your kids ask for more attention than usual, seeing you all day there. This makes us value more the selection of the right people in your team. Again, those three values are really, really important in setting up the right behaviour: Independent, motivated and cares about what they are doing.

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SC: How about you, Vlada? How are you keeping morale up? Are you doing the same things? Different things?

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VM: Yeah, I mean, we definitely pay additional attention. And if you look into the typical meeting, I believe that we spend like the first 10, 15 minutes talking about how everybody is doing, if there are any issues and so on. I mean, these are stressful times and we are all worried about our mental health. This prolonged isolation could definitely, potentially impact on our morale and productivity. There are negative headlines around us. As I said, we are all worried about or maybe we have someone who is sick or elderly and like only fighting the urge to go panic buying for toilet paper can help with work on the backburner, right? So, we do talk like, you know, normal. We the people, and I'm trying to give them some advices and they are giving the same advices to their teams. But basically, it's about communicating as much as you can. Like, for managers, provide a clear communication to the teams. Teams are trying to recreate some social context using videoconferencing to translate some in-office social activities to an online environment like maybe celebrate birthdays, give praises for goals reached, etc. A lot of teams are, and actually, leads are organising regular meetings with no agenda. There are people like just grabbing a coffee or a drink and having a quick chat. So overall, I mean, I think that a short run period of one or two months working full time from home, based on what I'm hearing from the other, which should be personally painful, but bearable. A longer period of, let's see, two or three months or more, could lead to some economic and health costs. So that's what we are trying to prevent. But there is no, like, magic formula, basically.

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SC: No, of course not. I mean, you know, we're all figuring this out together for the first time, so that's why we're sharing right now to get good ideas. I mean, for my team, we started having a daily call in the afternoon just for 15 minutes. And I said, 'There is no agenda for this call. I don't want to hear any negative anything. No headlines, no nothing. We're just going to get on and we're gonna have fun. And if you saw a funny video, we want to see it. If you heard something hilarious, please share it.' And it's just, it's just nice to get on and just be social and not have to talk about what's happening outside and not have to talk about work for a little while. So, I hear you. And I've

seen that pop up in other areas around the company. I think constant communication is obviously critical, but it can't all be about work because even in a perfectly normal environment, our lives are not all about work, right? There's a balance, there's a fluidity to it. And, you know, we are social animals. We have other things in our minds and hearts. So, it's interesting to hear you both kind of respond to that. So, thanks for that. Alright. So, remote working is not new to us because we do use distributed teams, but a lot of other companies are kind of experiencing this for the first time. And some of them are adapting very well. Some of them are really kind of going through some pain. So, over the time that you both have been leading teams in this way, what do you think the top two pieces of advice would be if you could kind of pull that and share that with other listeners in other companies? Vlada, why don't we start with you this time?

[00:16:17]

VM: Yeah, sure. So, I understand that this is going to sound like a cliché, but I cannot overemphasise the importance of good communication between teams on various locations. On a typical project, we have a multiple geographically distributed teams and if you don't pay attention to the communication between teams, and if you don't manage it and do something proactively, what typically happens is that folks within a team on one location, they work and communicate well while there is a gap in communication between locations, and it's often 'us vs. them' symptom. And I believe I already mentioned two techniques that I typically use to open those communication channels. One is to make sure that people spend some time in person together if possible, and the other was to start with the mixed scrum teams. And once you build that team spirit and communication channels, you can move to having the separated scrum teams on multiple locations.

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SC: Alright, Bogdan, how about you?

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BT: I'm quite close with what Vlada said. So basically, the first is people. So, everything, it's about people. So, especially in distributed teams, you have to take care of what people would be in these teams. I think this is quite essential. And the second part is to have a leader in the team that will grow the level of trust between people in those teams. And he should pay a lot of attention on that. Yeah, and definitely, if a client starts for the first time this journey, definitely, they need a partner that has done this before. Otherwise, we'll take all the pain and all the things that other hits from the beginning. So, it will be quite challenging. I think these are the top three things that I have in mind.

[00:18:19]

SC: Alright. Good stuff. OK. So, we have a little bit of time left. We're going to play a little game called 'This or That'. It's kind of a lightning round. So, I'm going to ask you a couple of questions. I'm going to give you a choice between two different things, and I want both of you to answer with your preference. Now, I didn't write these. So, you know, if you have other issues, philosophical issues with any of these questions, you can, we can take it up later. Alright. Here we go. Ready? So, we will do Bogdan first and then Vlada second so we don't step on each other. Ready? Here we go. Bogdan, Miro or Trello?

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BT: Trello.

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SC: Vlada.

[00:18:54]

VM: Yeah, I'm Trello user since it came out, so Trello.

[00:18:57]

SC: Bogdan, analogue or smartwatch?

[00:19:00]

BT: Neither.

[00:19:02]

SC: Whoa! No watch. Curveball. Vlada?

[00:19:07]

VM: Yeah, I recently bought a Apple Watch, and my real, my dilemma was Apple Watch or Garmin.

[00:19:14]

SC: Yes, that's a tough choice. I know. Alright. Bogdan, streaming or physical media?

[00:19:20]

BT: Streaming, of course. Yeah.

[00:19:23]

SC: Vlada?

[00:19:25]

VM: Streaming for movies, and vinyl for music.

[00:19:29]

SC: Oh, alright, we're gonna talk about that later. Alright. Speaking of music, Spotify or Apple Music?

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BT: Spotify. I have a teenage daughter.

[00:19:39]

SC: Vlada?

[00:19:40]

VM: It's actually Tidal for me, and I moved from Apple Music to Tidal like four or five years ago when Tidal introduced Hi-Fi audio quality.

[00:19:50]

SC: OK, we're definitely going to have a music conversation later. That's it. Vinyl plus Tidal? Yes. OK. Alright. Bogdan, Revolut or old big bank?

[00:19:59]

BT: Both. Revolut. Let's say Revolut.

[00:20:02]

SC: OK. Vlada?

[00:20:04]

VM: Yeah, I'm afraid we only have old big banks where I live here in Serbia. So that's my choice.

[00:20:11]

SC: Alright. And then this last one, I almost don't even want to ask it because it's kind of a bear trap for security concerns. But Teams or Zoom?

[00:20:21]

BT: Of course, Teams.

[00:20:23]

SC: [Laughter] Vlada?

[00:20:26]

VM: Yes. Teams, too. But I don't like Zoom's UX and UI feels so outdated. So, definitely Teams.

[00:20:34]

SC: Alright. Fair enough. Thank you, guys for being with me today. We're going to continue this conversation in a part two, but right now we're going to wrap it up. One other thing I'd like to mention is that we are also offering an opportunity for companies who are struggling right now, finding themselves having difficulties navigating the challenges in distributed software delivery, you know, struggling with the way teams are working and being distributed that are usually onsite. We'd like to have a conversation with you. We have one-to-one sessions with our delivery experts like Vlada that we can offer. Now, this is not a sales call. There's no obligation here. It's merely a conversation to help give you some insight from the things that we have learned over the past 20 years of doing this ourselves. And if we can help, we'd love to, right? And this can cover lots of stuff like how to keep people who are usually onsite motivated in this new and unfamiliar world of remote working, keeping up levels of productivity and engagement with teams suddenly being distributed that used to be together, tools and processes—certainly if you have specific questions around that, we can help steer you in a certain direction. And, you know, how to resolve specific problems in getting these distributed working processes up and running. So, if that sounds like something you're interested in, please reach out to us. You can email us at contactus@endava.com. And again, this is not a sales call. It's just a conversation—see if we can help out. Alright? So please reach out if that's something you're interested in. And don't forget to like this podcast and subscribe, please, to stay up to date with all of our shows. Thanks.