TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW WITH Ph.D. Travis DeWolf[1]

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00:00 **Flavia Cáceres:** I would like to introduce my colleagues. Okay. So first of all, I'd like to introduce Victoria. She's the Senior Project Manager.

00:07 **Victoria Gálvez:** Hi, Travis. Nice to meet you.

00:11 **Flavia Cáceres:** Then we have Pablo López, who is the Research and Development Coordinator.

00:17 **Pablo López:** Hello. Nice to meet you.

00:20 **Flavia Cáceres:** And last but not least, Javier Huaman who is the Research and Development Coordinator.

00:24 **Javier Huaman:** Hi, Travis. Glad to meet you.

00:31 **Flavia Cáceres:** Now I'll briefly like to explain who we are. We are AnnexBox, an IT startup company, and our main goal is to provide global virtual teams with support and solutions in order to enhance the synergy and productivity among

them. And now I'll hand it off to my colleague Pablo, who's going to explain the purpose of this interview.

00:49 **Pablo López:** Okay. Thank you, Flavia. My name is Pablo and I would like to thank you on behalf of our team for taking the time to join us here today. Well, today we would like to discuss some topics related to mainly remote working and virtual teams and we would like to know your experience working remotely. For that, we've crafted some questions to guide our conversation. So before we start, please be sure that your insight is of great value to us. We would like to know your experience with remote working and this information will help us and we'll help other organizations that are working remotely to enhance their virtuality and support them.

01:49 **Flavia Cáceres:** And now we can start with the questions.

01:56 **Pablo López:** Okay, thank you Flavia. So, as Flavia briefly mentioned, we are also a remote team and a global team. We've been remote since the very beginning. As such, we have experienced firsthand the different challenges that working remotely can bring. But I would like to know about your experience. We would like to know, what do you think are the main or the biggest challenges that your team specifically faces while working remotely?

02:30 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** I guess so I'll describe our setup a little bit because I think that we're able to avoid some of the challenges that people often experience. We have been remote based since 2015 and that was kind of just by necessity. We didn't want to live in the same place, and we can mainly communicate through Slack with heavy use of Google Hangouts to have discussions. And there was a real focus on our team for even people that are in person, that we don't have multiple people in a room and then one person remote. If anyone is going to be remote in the conversation, then everyone is remote. And that goes a long way, because we tried one person remote and that

never worked well. You end up having a conversation between the people that are in the room, in person, and the person that's remote can sometimes hear what's happening, and even if they do hear they usually can't interject anything because no one's listening, or the microphone is pointed the wrong way or something along these lines. So, we have all our meetings, like everyone is at their laptop, even if their laptop is like, next to the other person or one of the other people in the meeting. So those are one of our focuses that's really helped us. Of course, that's been less of an issue since COVID. I guess that's basically our setup. We have most of our conversations through Slack and then anything that's bothersome to type out we just hop into Google Hangouts. So I guess, challenges that we've faced with this, personally, when I came into the team, I had already worked with many of the members for at least eight years, and so there wasn't really an issue of having a sense of community or getting to bond or connect with them because we're already like heavily connected. I think that has been something of an issue for newer team members coming in, because when we have morning scrums largely people are working independently. And so, you get to communicate with one or maybe two other people in the company, but there's definitely a lack of a general social cohesion that you might experience if there was a common workroom, a lunchroom or a coffee space. That's probably the main issue that we've encountered. As far as technical issues, there's very little difficulty that we've experienced with this setup. And actually, I find it largely preferable in a lot of ways in that there's a written history of most conversations. That's very easy to reference and go back and find later, instead of just like, an oral history that can be forgotten which I often forget, so that's very helpful. So, to try to kind of address it, the sense of social cohesion, some of the things that we've done are like, you know, group or lunch times, or some people will gather for eating lunch together. This is kind of a pain because that's also your own time off and you're spending it with people at work, which you know, it's okay, but you're eating in front of your computer on top of staring at your computer the rest of the day. So that's okay. We've also set up,

not quite pair programming sessions, but something similar to pair programming sessions where one person will just kind of host and to work through or continue to do work narrating what they're doing while the other person gets to learn about the project that they're working on and ask questions and things like that. That's been popular, but we do that like once every three weeks. One person will host and deal with one kind of thing we found is about the right timing for that. And then aside from that, we'll also take during the workday, once a month or twice a month, online games for whoever's interested in this kind of thing. But definitely that's, I think it's social. We have a few people that are newer to the group and living in an apartment by themselves and feeling very isolated. I think that's the main issue we have experienced.

06:54 **Pablo López:** Okay. Great. First, I'm curious about that transition that you mentioned when you started working fully remote since 2015 if I'm not wrong, right? I would like to know a little bit about that. How was the transition? Did you find any particular challenge?

07:15 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** No, I don't think we really experienced too many challenges. The closest thing that we had is that for some of our work with physical robots I wasn't with the robot, which makes it difficult to replace them or switch things on and off, stuff like that. So, I had another teammate and we basically just left Google Hangouts on throughout the day. Technically though, I don't think we really experienced many issues, because all of our processes were already through JIRA or communication through Slack. Everything was already online.

08:28 **Victoria Gálvez:** I have a couple of questions, just very quick questions. Thank you. So, my first question would be, how long would you say the transition to remote working took? And at any point, did you find any of the members of the team feeling, I'm not sure, reluctant but maybe anxious about the transition?

Thank you.

08:54 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Good question. Yeah, so I guess there was some resistance to having everyone online, even if some people were in person for meetings, to have everyone at their computer. But it was minimal, and the benefits of it were very clear, everyone could fully participate in the conversation. I think that'd be the closest to like people that took the longest, I guess maybe half a year, to kind of really - people still wouldn't push for it. After that, everyone just got used to it, because it definitely was a thing that felt silly to do, to have people in person with their own laptops with headphones and headsets. Maybe half a year for that. Aside from that, at the time we had an office space in Waterloo. And so, people still got lots of contact and there weren't any issues with social isolation or things along those lines. So, some minimal resistance from that, which I think is another large piece that people often are concerned about with fully remote work. So yeah, I guess, sorry, maybe fully remote isn't accurate. Yeah, it would have been, there was an office space to be at, but everything happened online, until 2019. And then it was everyone is in their own space by themselves, with COVID. So, sorry, I think I mischaracterized that.

10:50 **Pablo López:** Okay, thank you. Let's move on to the next question, please Flavia. This one is related to productivity. We would like to know if you have faced any challenges regarding productivity and if you have any strategies in your team to enhance your productivity while working remotely.

11:25 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** I don't know that we've particularly faced any productivity issues that are unique to remote work. I think basically all of the ones that we encountered were just standard issues that you could encounter in any scenario and that like basic management practice, like checking in on people and making sure everyone has access to the resources they need and all of that stuff. Those were fully able to be addressed. Yeah, I guess also that everyone on my

team is all in the same time zone, so that possibly also resulted in us not running into any issues. We do have some people that are in Germany and some that are in Manitoba. So there's definitely the issue of communication being somewhat asynchronous because they're just not online at the same time. But overall, at least in my experience, I haven't really faced any challenges unique to remote work.

12:28 **Pablo López:** Okay. So, one thing may be going to another different thing is also called burnout. For example, people working remotely can work from their homes, of course, and that could bring a challenge regarding work-life balance because that could be like mixing up things working in your home. So, I don't know if any of your team members or your team have had that problem.

12:57 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** I'm pretty strict about making sure people don't work more than 40 hours a week. I really discouraged that for exactly that reason. This is a general problem with remote work, is that people treat every issue like it's a sprint that we need to solve as soon as quickly and everything is a marathon. Even if you think it's a sprint, it's a marathon. So, work eight hours and then stop. My sense at least, is that we've been able to avoid burnout pretty well. I've definitely experienced it somewhat myself, but I don't think that it's a remote caused issue.

13:48 **Pablo López:** Okay, great. Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this matter. Let's just move to the next question, which is regarding a different thing that is culture. Culture is a crucial part. It doesn't matter if you're working in a conventional or in a remote environment, culture will always be something that you like to enhance. But some virtual and global teams have had a bad time trying to build and maintain a culture within a company while working remotely. So, in that sense, we would like to know your experience. If you have identified any main aspects that maintain or enhance your team's culture while working remotely.

14:36 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Yeah, I think this is probably difficult for me to answer

effectively because I've largely transitioned straight from academia into this role. And so, my experience for seven years has been here. So, I don't have a great differentiation point. I don't have a lot of experience at other companies to really be able to identify. A lot of what we do seems like the only way that makes sense to do it to me. So, I don't have experience with other cultures to be able to really identify what we're doing, if there's anything that we're doing that is unique. So, it's hard for me to say. We give people a lot of autonomy, flexible work hours, and questions anytime.

15:25 **Victoria Gálvez:** Sorry to jump in again, I have a question. So, in some cases, in many cases, actually, there's behaviors that new members adopt, as a result of the interaction with their peers once they join a new organization, right? So, something that we're very interested in is knowing how remote companies deal with their own boarding processes so that this normalization of certain behaviors that we do want to encourage happen. What could you tell us about that?

15:57 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** So, a lot of our onboarding is focusing on— we do have like a document that is kind of detailed, like things that we're expecting from communication, which I can send your way actually if you are interested in that kind of details. Ways to present questions, how to approach general interactions, don't be a dick, that kind of stuff. And then a lot of that we get through the onboarding of, I guess, processing culture is done during that, like, our code review practices, our team planning meetings and things along those lines. We use Click Up instead of JIRA for task planning and stuff like that. And so, in those planning meetings, we kind of outline what we're expecting and in what ways, and frequency of updates and things along that nature. I guess largely just through our kind of standard meetings and process meetings with the groups and teams and stuff. I think that is how people are picking up our culture. And the rest would largely be code review. We have a lot of contact points and discussions with other team members, supervisors, things along those lines.

17:29 **Victoria Gálvez:** Thank you for your answer.

17:31 **Pablo López:** Okay. I'm kind of curious about the kind of set up norms that you mentioned. It's really interesting for me. How did it come up? Why did you guys decide to build that?

17:42 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Oh yeah. I think someone pointed out that. We came across a few articles about ways that people use online communication, like Slack, that can be really toxic for the work environment, such as, the one that was most salient, expecting people to respond immediately. It's like phrasing your questions in a way that's like: "I need you to respond right now." And that's not great in the online work environment, because now I have like five notifications that I need to respond to every time they come up and it really is interrupting my work. So, we were reading a document about this that was describing some of the ways online communication can be misused. That makes it really stressful, having all your notifications on, rather than turning them off and just checking every half hour or every hour kind of thing. And then we realized we had a bunch of other things in place that we were all kind of following and we were used to, especially for new hires or co-ops and stuff, we wanted them to just take a look at them. Let's see if I can find it here. Sorry, I can also just find it after and send it to you.

19:27 **Victoria Gálvez:** That'd be great. Thank you.

19:30 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Okay. Yeah, no problem.

19:33 **Pablo López:** Okay, great. Thank you. So, let's move on to the next question, please. Now let's talk about skills. Well, some people that have experience working remotely mentioned that there are some specific skills that are needed to work remotely and to make working remotely a much better experience. So, we would like to know if in your experience you have identified any skills needed to be a better remote worker, to make remote working a better experience.

20:19 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** I guess one of the things we definitely focus on is really strong communication skills. It's very tempting to like asking questions, especially in asking questions, it can be possibly more confusing, especially when communicating asynchronously or a couple hours apart. In face-to-face communication you might say this or that, and it's very confusing in text what this or that means a lot of the time. So, we try to avoid those kinds of ambiguous phrasings. But just general strong communication is very helpful. Nothing is really coming to mind specifically for remote work. Everything that I can think of is just general skills that you'd want in person or on a remote team.

21:21 **Pablo López:** Okay, great. Communication is one of the very big challenges in working remotely. So again, thank you for sharing your thoughts on that. Now, let's move to the next question regarding motivation and engagement. Well, of course we've been talking about the advantages of working remotely and we've also experienced firsthand the advantages of working remotely. But this conversation has been covering all the challenges and another challenge that working remotely also brings is motivation. Some people might feel isolated, so people might feel alone working in their home, working wherever they are. So, we would like to know if you have experienced something like that in your team. Something regarding motivation and engagement, any problem, any challenge. And if you have any strategy to solve that, any strategy you used to mitigate that.

22:31 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** I mean, we definitely have experienced problems that are more or less, or like tasks that are more or less interesting to work on and some that drag on. But that's just normal work stuff. Remote wise, I'm not sure. We might largely be avoiding this because our hires, at least on my team, are from an engineering or a scientific background. And this is kind of like, this is the work that we've always done. It's along these lines where you get the problems defined and then you go work on it by yourself or with teammates. But still you're largely developing things in isolation or, you know, relative isolation. You're not like

programming code together usually. We'll diagram things together and get outlines as much as necessary, but then at some point everyone goes off and does their work and that's pretty standard. Maybe that's not the case with marketing or sales kind of things, but we have people on teams that definitely miss these in person office social aspects and are generally just frustrated with the COVID situation and generally missing social contact and kind of becoming demotivated that way. But that's a general kind of thing, not like a work specific thing. I guess we try to keep the meetings frequent enough. You know, we're meeting several times a day and at least once every day I'm meeting with people on each team and with all of my team members. So I haven't noticed any specific disengagement from this kind of remote setting. It's hard for me to imagine being more engaged with my team members and having my team members more engaged if we were in person versus the setting that we are currently in because I don't feel like my communication with them is really and anyway.

24:56 **Pablo López:** Okay. I'm curious about that. You mentioned that some team members express their, I don't know, that they miss working in person. So how do you know that? Do they freely express that?

25:10 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** We asked them, basically. Yeah, it must've come up during one of the quarterly reviews or something along those lines. One of our questions is what could be improved. We are also looking at getting in person offices again. And so, we conducted a survey about who would be interested in it, because some of us are never going to go back to an office and somewhere they're interested to have at least like part-time offices.

25:45 **Pablo López:** Okay. And I'm guessing that's, I don't know, it's that new team members or those team members that have been previous the transition to remote work or it's a mix of them?

25:59 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Yeah. It's largely people that are either living by

themselves. I find it more strongly correlated with things like, they live by themselves or they're single, or things like that. Our team members who have a wife and kids said, "I'm fine, I have enough social interaction in my life." So, my sense is that it's more strongly correlated with that, people in their early twenties that are looking to be more social than our members that are older and have families.

26:37 **Pablo López:** Well, it makes sense. So, I would say, it's several team members. That's why you're considering bringing up another office, right?

26:48 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Yeah. It would be on the order of like eight people.

26:51 **Pablo López:** Okay. It makes sense. Okay, great. Just wanted to talk about that, I was just a little bit curious about that. But yeah, with that, we can wrap up our conversation. Again, thank you for getting the time to join us here and briefly talk about your experience and we'll see you another time anyway.

27:17 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Okay, perfect. I found this document, so I'll just send you through email.

27:23 **Pablo López:** Okay, that would be great. Thank you so much.

27:25 **Ph.D. Travis DeWolf:** Okay. Yeah. Thank you.

27:32 **Victoria Gálvez:** Thank you.

—End of Interview—