



# Remote hiring at scale.

A discussion on how to do it, with  
Toby Nieboer.

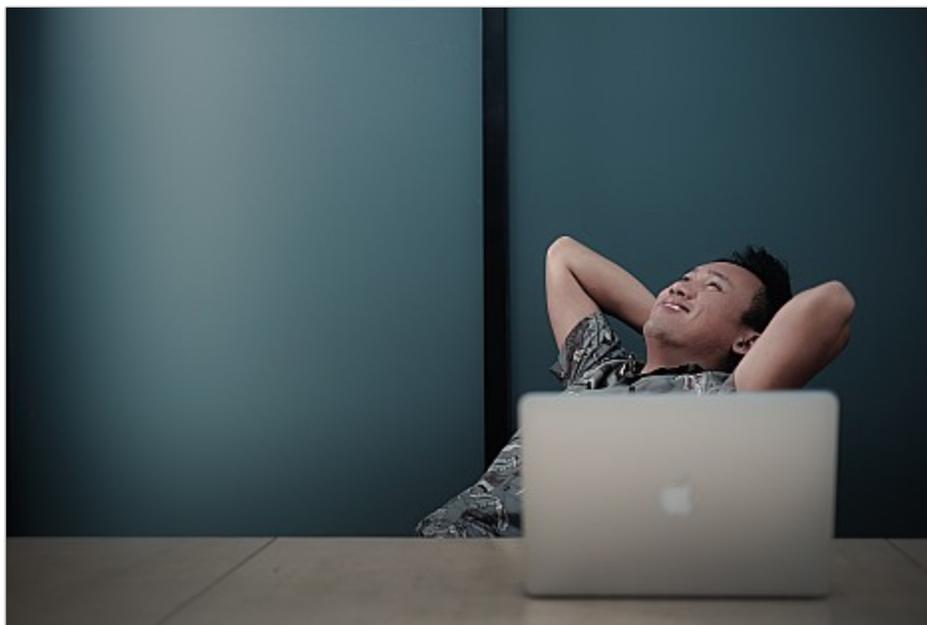


## Remote hiring at scale

Since March 2020, a large proportion of businesses have been forced to embrace entirely remote working for the first time. For some it's been a shock, but based on anecdotal feedback from our network, and the ability of the human spirit to overcome any adversity, many have found it enlightening. There seems to be a groundswell of optimism to this remote working thing.

We've had customers who previously looked at candidate enquiries into "flexible working" with suspicion. As if they were second rate applicants. They had to "earn the right" to flexible working. These organisations are now some of the biggest advocates of remote working. They're starting to see the effects of focussed teams being able to deliver equally well, if not better than previously.

It's not just Engineering managers and team leads who are doing this. CFO's and finance teams are running modelling on the financial benefits and possibilities of remote teams. Less long term commitments to corporate leases in favour of monthly allowances for team members to fit out their home offices or deals with national co-working spaces so team members can have a change of scenery.



## Remote hiring at scale

Hiring remotely every now and then is relatively straight forward. But managing it effectively is challenging for larger businesses where you are hiring multiple roles every month. We were interested to explore how these businesses did it. So we caught up with our pal Toby Nieboer, formerly a technical recruiter at Automattic. Chances are you've never heard of Automattic. You've most likely heard of some of their brands, however: WordPress.com, WooCommerce, Tumblr and Gravatar.

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In their own words they are, "a distributed company with 1,193 Automatticians in 75 countries speaking 93 different languages." This is no mean feat when it comes to hiring. It takes a slightly different approach to how to manage not only a process, but also the way you approach managing headcount.

It's not entirely unique, but it's certainly an uncommon approach. Consistently screen, interview and trial candidates and match them to vacancies once they've been through the process. With a recruitment process that obviously entirely remote, but also predominantly carried out on Slack, it's different to what a lot of candidates will be used to. But if it delivers results and great candidate experiences, then surely that's what counts?

### Hiring for attitude over skill.

One of the challenges of hiring for remote teams is not finding the technical fit per se, but rather finding people who are genuinely productive contributors when no-ones looking. The thought of working remotely on a permanent basis is a different prospect to actually doing it. So the hiring teams spend a lot of their energy understanding this over technical ability. People with a history of fully remote work may logically be a safer bet than those who are entirely new to it, but there's risk in every hire right? The challenge is just amplified with remote workers. So in this discussion we asked Toby about the thought process and the practicalities of hiring this way. This is a transcript of that discussion, that has been slightly edited for easier reading. But we've left it as true to the conversational flow as possible. So read it as a conversation, not as a blog. Our commentary is in italics, the rest is Toby.



# We got straight into the discussion, asking Toby about the process.

The way that the process worked was that people would apply as per usual. We requested a resume and a cover letter.

If we didn't get a cover letter, then we basically just treated the email that they sent to us as their cover letter. At one point we included some questions that we wanted people to answer. But we got some feedback over time that it felt like making people jump through hoops, so we moved away from that.

As part of the screening, we looked at obviously the resume just to see if their experience might be a fit. We didn't take into account whether they had remote working experience specifically, or rather I should say that the lack of it wasn't considered a detriment.

If they did have pretty extensive remote experience, then that was sort of a point in favour. With the cover letter/email, we've put a lot of effort into assessing that just to get some idea of motivation. When you have, you know, a company that is famously 100% remote, you then get a lot of people that are applying to you just because they want **a** remote job, not because they want **your** remote job. We, quite luckily, were in a position where we did not have to do a lot of sourcing or outreach or advertising. We got a lot of organic applications, so we got afforded the luxury to be a bit picky.

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Once we got people past screening and decided to interview them, we had ... interviewers from around the world.

So we used Calendly initially and then, eventually a tool called Interview Schedule where basically we just put in a pool of interviewers and then the candidate could pick whoever they wanted, whatever time works for them. You know, we didn't make any assumptions about "you're in Australia, therefore, you want Australian business hours." Like, you know, people sometimes chose to do theirs on a Saturday or on a Sunday afternoon. And you know, that's made possible by having people around the world to do the interviews. So we gave them a lot of autonomy.

We then did our interviews via Slack. They were text only, and we did them for 90 minutes to two hours, as a synchronous chat. And if there was more that needed to be sort of discussed, if we weren't able to get through, you know, all the things that we wanted to know, then we'd take the remainder of it async.

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So the person would basically just leave some questions there and the interviewer would get back to answering them, in their own time, when they were able to. Once we were at the point, to proceed – and a fair bit of that was about cultural fit rather than technical stuff. I mean, we had some technical questions in there, but we were looking at mostly sort of cultural things. After that point we did a code test, again in a fairly asynchronous sort of fashion. We sent them a GitHub repo with some instructions. We said, "don't spend any more than four to six hours of actual working time on this, actual coding time, but we don't expect it back any sooner than a week." Because we understand that you have a life and other commitments and a job presumably and all of this.

### Paid trial instead of probation.

And if people needed more time then we gave it to them. Once we got that back, we assessed it, provided them with feedback and decided whether or not to move on to the next stage, which was a paid trial.

So we would give them a trial project. It was the same trial project for everyone in the same role type – so there were different projects for front end and back end, for example. But, everybody working on the front end project got the same one, and that was the trial. So that everybody could see what it was like if that person worked at Automattic. We looked at how well they communicate in the written form. Written communication is, you know, is so important in an asynchronous workplace. We also looked at how they responded to feedback. You know, it was not uncommon for people to self eliminate, you know, getting feedback on their code and, you know, either flipping the table or just ignoring it, which, you know, helped us to really eliminate people who from past experience, just would not be successful.

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And then, once the trial concluded and we decided to make them an offer, that was pretty much that. The trial took the place of a probation period. So there wasn't a probation period after that. So it depended on how much time the person had to give to it because it was very candidate driven, as was the code test. To the point actually where the metrics that we use to measure our own recruitment performance could not take into account the time that the candidates spent on the test and the trial because it was entirely their own doing.

We had no influence on how much time they spent on it. So typically it ran for about two to eight weeks. We had people who were doing it full time because they were in-between jobs or had taken some annual leave to do it.

We had people that had, you know, three hours, a week on alternate Tuesdays to do it. So we had some people do the trial in as little as like five business days and we had one that ran nine months because of various things. But we still paid them \$25US per hour. They billed us every month. And you know, as long as there was forward progress then then we were fine. We made it very clear to them that the amount of time that it took them to complete it was not a factor in the decision.

***Cool. So then from a process perspective then I'm guessing in the backend, someone's got to verify that work's been done on the trial and then let payroll know so they can pay that bill?***

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Exactly. So there's a, there's a trial lead, assigned to every candidate. And so they basically are the person that does that function as like the team lead there. They hand out the work, they're the person to come to for questions. They, you know, assess the chunks of work that are being done and, and provide the feedback. And that would happen, once a week there would be a debrief or feedback, "here are the things that we think are going well or here are the things that we think could use some improvement" And we would actually give them one of three assessments saying, a) if everything continues as it is, you have every chance of being hired, b) there are some things to work on, but you're looking good or c) there are some things that are going to need to be improved for you to have a reasonable chance of being hired.

So pretty consistent, constant feedback.

And all of this, I should add, was pretty much being done text only. So, when I joined, I didn't see somebody's face on a video chat until the third day that I started working there.

I had two hours of face to face time with people per week and that was it. I had one one-on-one and one team chat and everything else was texting.

***I'm sure you did, but when you surveyed them, what sort of feedback did you get from candidates around interviewing totally remotely?***

Yeah. We did, because we use Greenhouse that has an inbuilt candidate survey with questions that you can't edit. So we just ended up using that standard thing and it does have a question about how they found the interview process and that sort of thing. And there was kind of an even split between, "this is really fascinating I've never done this before. Thanks for the, you know, thanks for the experience."

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And some that were like, "we had an hour and a half Slack chat. There's no way you can assess my abilities in that time". And that second group of people was missing the point, which was, you know, in that hour and a half Slack chat we had generally worked out that they were not really communicating effectively in that medium and wouldn't be a great fit. I mean we looked at things like, if we asked a question, how long did it take to get a response? Did they just sit there and sort of, you know, this person is typing for like 17 minutes and then they'd answered the question. Did they, you know, give us like little short responses to sort of keep the conversational flow going? Or did they write a full huge paragraph?

***So I mean, I'm guessing for a business that works entirely remotely, is it fair to say that some of your selection criteria that might be that, "we value really great comms skills over being a fucking great engineer. If we can get both, that's cool. But if we had to choose one, we'd pick great comms skills, cause we can teach the engineering stuff"?***

A hundred percent. Yeah. the P2's, the internal blogs, they work really well as a form of documentation because, you know, for any feature or for any product, we have 14 years of history in these blogs that is not only, you look at documentation for a piece of software and it's usually just "this is what we built. This is the end state. This is how it works." Right? It's like history being written by the winners. But if you, if you look back to when the original idea was conceived and you look at the first idea and then all of the comments and all of the discussion and all of the things that people tried then that didn't work. And all of this, it's all this context, which is something that you don't normally get in documentation. It's usually locked up in somebody's head. And even if that person's head is still at the company, it might be 2:00 AM where they are and if you need to know, you know, why something is the way it is, then having those blogs there is a great way to do it. You just, you plug them into an elasticsearch instance and you can find anything you need.

And so for that reason, being able to write and to communicate effectively and concisely is like a non-negotiable skill.

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*Yeah. and from a hiring manager's perspective, I'm guessing then, your focus is probably on coaching your hiring managers to ask the right questions, to listen, to document stuff so they can make the best hiring decisions possible. And I, I know from experience it's just as easy to get bias in a video interview as it is face to face. You know, within the first few seconds you go "uh-oh", but then you surprise yourself 20 minutes later and you go, "actually, they were great."*

Yeah, we'll do that with video as well. But from a hiring manager perspective, I'm guessing you can't be at every interview (as a recruiter) and coach everyone, cause there are different times zones. Normally you know, we'd sit in on interviews and you'd be coaching your hiring managers and you could do that cause you're in the same time zone and in the same location. That's kind of easy. But when you're in different times zones and different locations, that's harder to do.

### Onboarding for interviewers.

Yeah. So the way that it worked, was that we didn't actually have hiring managers involved. We had interviewers that were volunteers from the engineering organization, but we didn't determine the team that somebody was going to go into until the very end of the process. And so we made them an offer and we had a sense of what they were like as an engineer and where they would best fit. And, you know, given the amount of time that it might take, the team that actually needed somebody at the end of the process, was not necessarily who was looking at the beginning. But in terms of coaching interviewers, we had an onboarding process for them where they would shadow an established interviewer and then in turn, that person would shadow them.

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So we got them up to speed so that they were, you know, doing things in a way that was most likely to eliminate bias. We required everybody to go through, both Facebook and Google have video material available on eliminating bias, which is handy. So we had them go through that. But the other thing was that, the format, it kind of helps to combat bias. In a lot of circumstances, just because of the nature of, you know, not being familiar with names around every corner of the globe, I could not tell you the gender of the person I was speaking to. I could tell you what country they lived in, but I couldn't tell you their ethnicity or what they look like.

### Consistency with interview performance and evaluation.

So that was a factor, and then, we had a rubric as well, which was, I think four different areas and then a set of questions within each. And you didn't have to ask all the questions, you could pick whatever questions you wanted. But for each of those we had examples of what a good answer, an okay answer and a not so good answer looked like. So it's inherently a bit of a subjective process, but we tried to build in as much objectivity as we possibly could.

Just to, you know, ensure that no matter who the interviewer was that you ended up getting, your interview performance would have the same results.

***And Toby, you mentioned, the focus predominantly on culture. What were the indicators that you use to determine culture over text (on Slack)?***

So, mostly around the engineering culture was kind of a big one. So we, you know, we had questions that sort of focused on, things like, you know, you come across a problem, that's outside your area, you know, how would you handle it or how have you handled it

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***Did you measure those responses against the Creed? I saw that they'd created a creed that was quite a substantial statement.***

Yup. Yeah, we do. That was kind of the basis. The creed has sort of, it's changed a little bit over the years and there's more emphasis on diversity in it now. But one of the major things about Automattic is the level of autonomy that people have, which is a bit of a double edged sword. You know, I've said to people before that, one of the best things about working remotely here is that anybody can pretty much do anything they want. And one of the worst things about working remotely here, is that pretty much anybody can do anything they want. So there's a level of autonomy that everybody is trusted with and you know, culturally, some people are just not built to handle that, you know, whether it's environmental or fundamental to them.

***I'm guessing when you're looking at the cultural indicators, like past evidence and stuff, you know, running passion projects, doing stuff solo and solving problems by themselves, you know, it might be building their own web app or building something or launching something that they had to figure out themselves. Those kinds of indicators in (their) past history are kind of interesting.***

Yeah, natural curiosity is a big one.

***I was about to say, I guess that's harder for people that are younger, and that haven't worked as long, but it's actually bullshit isn't it? Because there are kids out there taking apart computers and rebuilding and just seeing how it works. So, I think if you've got that natural curiosity, you've got it at a younger age as much as you do at an older age.***

### Side hustles are a privilege.

I don't think we emphasized things like, you know, side hustle or passion projects because from a D&I standpoint, having time for that sort of thing is a privilege. It's not something that everybody has. I mean, you know, there are lots of people for whatever reason, who, you know, they work their nine to five and then they go home and they don't touch the keyboard again. You know, whether that's by choice or by force of circumstance. And we tried not to exclude those people that didn't have the luxury of doing side hustles, but, you know, even within the bounds of a nine to five, you can demonstrate curiosity by, you know, solving problems in new and different ways or evaluating new technologies, or that sort of thing.

***It's interesting, Toby, I was just reading an article on Automattic prior to coming in, so I had all this kind of information. The whole text interview was something that just fascinated me. So, you know, do you get a lot of, or many candidates that self selected out when they realized that was the way that they'd be kind of communicating?***

Yes – because of the length of the process, we had people drop out at different places. It was not, it was relatively rare for people to get to the end of just a text interview, that initial one and to say, "you know what, this really isn't for me."

People would then self exclude at, at the code test if they realized that they weren't up to scratch technically. And that's by design so that's fine.

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People dropping out during the trial was relatively rare, for it to be, "if this is the work, then I don't want to do it." it was more "I've seen your stack now and I've seen how you work and I don't really want to do it this way."

We did occasionally have people get to, you know, the end of a year or two years with the company and go, "you know what, remote just isn't for me. I need people. I need to be in an office. It's not going to happen."

***Anecdotally, what sort of % that would be?***

So attrition in the engineering or on a yearly basis was sub 5%. and relatively few of those, probably about one every 18 months to two years, was in the "remote isn't for me" bucket.

You know, the attrition being low to begin with doesn't give us a big data set to work with. And that, that attrition being so low as it is purely because of the hiring process. You know, they've already seen what it's like to work there by the time they take the offer..

***I'm going to guess that making sure that all your or your career based dialogue is really consistent. You're having the pre-engagement dialogue about what it's like to work there. All those little micro communications through the process are consistent, so that people who do get to the end of the process probably shouldn't be self-selecting and shouldn't be going, "Oh shit, I didn't know it was gonna be like this. I didn't know I was going to have to do that."***

It should ideally not be a surprise by that point. Yeah.



### Can remote, semi automated processes be personal?

So there were some challenges that we faced along the way. So just really quickly to go over a few of those. One was, kind of a general lack of warmth in the process. So, you know, it's pretty impersonal to, you know, send in a job application via email, to get an email back that says book your own appointment time, to then have a text chat, you know, with some faceless somebody at the other end of the Slack channel, to then be emailed a code test and to say, come back to us when it's done.

So we experimented with, rather than inviting people into our Slack, you know, right ahead of their interview, we experimented with inviting them right away and having a dedicated, channel for them that we put all of our recruiters into who could then, do a little, you know, pre chat and answer any sort of real basic non-technical questions about working at the company and that sort of thing. And that then was kind of a double edged sword because it freed up the interviewers to move past the basics more quickly and to get into sort of some meatier topics. But the time commitment for us was just massive. So it didn't really work out to do that.

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*Did you have some kind of integration into your ATS for that as well where you can have those chats there going into your ATS?*

So we built our own tool that automated a lot of the process. so it would create the Slack channel for us and send the invite. Once the process was complete, we could then copy a transcript of the entire candidate channel into Greenhouse. and then we would periodically audit those for interviewer feedback and that sort of thing.

Another issue we had was, as I mentioned earlier, we had questions that were in the job posting to begin with and one of the things that we struggled with pretty hard, with the whole two years that I was there was that we couldn't really get our percentage of women applicants to shift appreciably.

So we ran this survey, this research piece where we talked to senior women in engineering roles about, the kinds of things that they look for when they're looking for a new job. The reasons that they start to look around, the things in a job posting that they consider to be red or green flags, the things in an interview process that would make them consider dropping out, that sort of thing.

And jumping through hoops was a big one. You know, we already had a bit of a bias against trick questions because, trick questions really only exist to prove how smart the interviewer is. Like they're not useful in any way. But having questions on the job posting, it feels to some people like the same sort of thing. You know, you're being asked to prove that you're not an idiot by the fact that you read the whole post.

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Well, you know, that's kind of juvenile in a way, so we got rid of those. We made some changes to the job postings. Knowing that there is a difference between, how many of the requirements somebody meets, affects whether or not they'll apply. I mean, men will apply if they meet 70%, and women will, if they miss one tick box, then they won't apply. So we made some changes to the wording. We mandated that everything had to be run through Textio and score a 95 or above, for more inclusive language. We generally wanted our ads to skew a little bit female if we could, that sort of thing. And we did see a bit of a shift in that percentage.

## Culture contribution, not culture "fit".

*When I think about, you know, the process, but then out the other side, I think there's some really interesting stuff that we can do. I think being clear with expectations is a big one. Autonomy isn't for everyone, it really isn't. You need to recognize that you could be interviewing some great engineers, but they're not necessarily going to be the best hires because your criteria for what makes a good hire is different to others.*

***The great comms and the ability to work autonomously are probably more important than being a great engineer, because as you said, you can teach that. So maybe spend more on L and D, if you're gonna reduce your costs, like office space and you're going to go remote, then you need to be spending more on L and D and coaching, all that sort of stuff. So where you spend your money changes to get the same outcome. To me. That's interesting.***

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Yeah. I think, you know, if what comes out of this is that businesses stop thinking about a cultural fit and more about a **cultural contribution**, then that's going to be a great thing. I mean, cultural fit a lot of the time it's basically just code for, "is like me" you know, and if you can't assess that, you know, in a text-only conversation, then the only thing that you can start really assessing is, "is this person going to bring something to my team that I don't already have?" You know, if I have a team that is fairly, you know, disengaged or fairly quiet or, seems a bit over it, you know, is this person the live wire that's going to actually build some culture in my team, you know, is going to build some enthusiasm and engagement?

*Yeah. Are they a piece of a puzzle If this was my ideal team, are they the missing piece yeah, and I love the phrase contribution.*

*You know, what do they bring, yes that we don't already have, but also how do they accentuate what we do already have?*

Yeah, absolutely.

*Brilliant mate. Thank you again. Thank you so much. Okay. And when we're all back to normal we'll get together to say, thank you.*

Our huge thanks to Toby for his time and for the discussion. We loved chatting to him.

Remote interviewing at scale with any success is going to take iteration and continual evaluation of the process and results.

Internal and external feedback is king.

Thanks to you as well for reading this, we hope you got something from it.

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