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REINVENT THE 9-TO-5,  
HAVE FUN!



# REMOTE WORKS

MANAGING FOR FREEDOM,  
FLEXIBILITY, AND FOCUS



ALI GREENE AND   
TAMARA SANDERSON

FOREWORD BY MATT MULLENWEG, CO-FOUNDER  
OF WORDPRESS AND CEO OF AUTOMATTIC



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FLEXIBILITY, AND FOCUS

**ALI GREENE AND  
TAMARA SANDERSON**



**BK**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

## Remote Works

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*Thank you laptop warriors and email curators.*

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*Thank you remote workers everywhere.*

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*Thank you homes near and far.*

*Thank you library and coffee shop.*

*Thank you patio, sofa, and desktop.*

*Thank you airport lounge and your comfy chair.*

*Thank you to coworking spaces everywhere.*

*The end. (We’re kidding—this is just the beginning.)*

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# Foreword

WHEN I ENVISIONED the distributed work revolution, it wasn't due to a global pandemic. And while the circumstances that led us here are terrible, I'm glad that we're rethinking how we work.

The illusion that the office is about work has been shattered forever, and companies that embrace remote work will be better positioned to withstand the test of time. If we've learned anything from the pandemic, it's that we can never be sure about what tomorrow will bring.

The thing is, remote work isn't new. But with change, things often happen slowly and then all at once. The forces that enable working in a distributed fashion have been in motion for decades, and if you talk to anyone who was working in technology in the '60s and '70s, they expected this to happen much sooner. Stephen Wolfram has been a remote CEO for 30 years. Automattic has been distributed-first since our founding in 2005.

What's been holding companies back is fear of the unknown and attachment to the familiar. I can't tell you how many of the CEOs who said this would never work for them are now proclaiming that their company hasn't missed a beat as tens of thousands of people started working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. And

the investors I see espousing distributed work are the same ones who once told me that Automattic would never scale past a few dozen people unless we brought everyone into an office.

For this to really work, distributed work has to be part of the company's DNA. You have to be committed to keeping the creative center and soul of the organization online, and not in an office. At Automattic, we use the term *distributed* because to be "remote" suggests there's an office somewhere that you're not part of—it feels isolating.

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When I founded Automattic, a software company that started with WordPress.com and has expanded to a full suite of other tools and brands, I wanted to give people a benefit above and beyond what others ever could: We gave people the perk and the luxury of being part of an internet-changing company from anywhere in the world. We treat people on the basis of the quality of their ideas and their work, regardless of whether they're in San Francisco or Buenos Aires.

Our work at Automattic is far from finished, and I hope there are hundreds of failures we learn from over the next 20 years. Half the time I feel like we're making it up as we go along—I've never managed a distributed company of 2,000 people before. But the important things stay the same: the desire for impact and my love for working alongside people in a team, doing more than we ever could alone. For me, this is a life's work.

Where this model can sometimes go wrong is if people don't have a strong network outside of their work—in which case they can become isolated and fall into bad habits. Doing it right requires a redesign of your life. For decades, we've built our lives around work, and now we have the opportunity to build our work around our lives. But it takes time, and it takes intentionality. I encourage you to join groups, play sports, and get out into your community. And if

you've done all of this and you still haven't found your niche, start your own.

As a fun example, a few years back we had 14 employees in Seattle who wanted to beat the isolation by meeting up for work once a week. They found a local bar that didn't open until 5 p.m., pooled together the \$250 per month coworking stipends that Automattic provides, and persuaded the bar's owner to let them rent out the place during the daytime.

This is just one example, but there's an overarching lesson here that applies to any manager. You have to trust the people you've hired. That's when the magic of remote work happens. You start believing in one another's autonomy to get the work done, and then you witness the results when you give people the freedom to truly act upon their abilities, their creative capacity, and their ideas. Fundamentally, remote work only *works* when you release control.

I consider remote work a moral imperative. It's far more humane for workers. The micro-interactions of the hundreds of variables of your work environment can charge you and give you creative energy, or make you dependent, infantilized, and a character in someone else's story. Which do you want to spend half of your waking, work-day hours in?

*But it's not just an individual company story. Distributed work evens the playing ground worldwide.*

No longer are people beholden to the lottery of birth. At Automattic, we have employees located in 96 countries speaking 120 languages. You get a unique richness from accessing a global talent pool, which creates better products but also spreads economic opportunity more widely than it has been in the past. It also helps you break away from office meeting norms, where the highest-paid person's opinion matters most. When remote work is done well, people have time to sit with an idea and contribute, regardless of where they are based or what role they hold.

Now that, hopefully, you're feeling inspired, I want to turn to the reason we're all here. To make remote work *actually* work for you and your team under the esteemed guidance of Ali and Tamara.

In true remote work style, I first met Tam on Slack during her final round of interviews for Automattic. I asked her what book she would give to all of Automattic and what inscription she would write inside. In some ways, this book is bringing that question full circle, and now I'm the one writing the inscription.

Sometimes there can be an assumption that remote jobs are not quite as "real" as office jobs. But I can assure you that Tam did important work at Automattic. She led the integration of our largest acquisition to date (Tumblr), managed some of our most complicated partnerships, and assisted me with our Series D fundraising. But what I remember most about Tam is her enthusiasm for remote work.

We'd be in meetings with executives, and like clockwork, she'd captivate the audience with stories about the power of remote work, often flying in from somewhere exotic like Tbilisi or Mexico City. She said that remote work had given her a superpower. Gone were the days of hastily typed notes and forgotten handovers before partnership meetings. She was omnipresent and omnipotent because we had a record of every partnership meeting since Automattic's inception documented on P2, our internal blogging platform. Of course, this seems normal to me, but maybe that's just my vantage point.

At Automattic, we are all about practicing what we preach. We use our own software internally and are committed to the power of open-source technology. Therefore, I'm excited that you'll find the same principles in *Remote Works*. Tam and Ali cowrote this book while living on separate continents. Ali comes from a remote work organization I admire, DuckDuckGo, and was their director of People Operations. I know firsthand how hard it is to scale a company, and during Ali's time at DuckDuckGo, she helped grow the company from 30 to nearly 100 employees.

But Ali and Tam didn't stop with their firsthand knowledge. They harnessed the wisdom of crowds, interviewing dozens of experts from incredible remote companies. *Remote Works* uses a learn-by-doing mentality—encouraging you to think, reflect, and act, as they walk you through the steps to making remote work for your team, but also your life.

The truth is, there are a thousand ways to do remote work, but it starts with committing to it at all levels of the company. If you assume positive intent and place trust in your coworkers and employees—knowing that if they do great work in an office they can do great work anywhere—then you will all succeed.

But don't just take my word for it—take what's in this book and try it yourself!

—Matt Mullenweg

# Preface

HELLO,

We are so excited that you've picked up this book! Not only because we believe you're on a path to designing the remote work life of your dreams, but also because it contains all of the remote work lessons we've learned firsthand along the way (along with dozens more from our fellow remote work leaders). It is all the advice we wish we had when we first started, and we can't wait to share it with you!

But first, we need you to do one thing: *Drop your remote work baggage at the door.*

We get it. We also have a love-hate relationship with Zoom and have been in countless conversations where eyes glaze over the second we say we're advocates for remote work. The thing is, when we started writing this book, the world was at the height of a global pandemic that looked *nothing* like the remote work we've known and loved. It's been exhausting, even for us. All of this to say . . . *there must be a better way.*

Don't worry; we guarantee you there is. We know it. We have lived it (more on that later).

Remote work is no longer a futuristic pipe dream for a few lucky people. It is the present—whether or not companies are ready to adapt. If you are sending emails, saving data to the cloud, or using countless other forms of technology, you have the tools you need to design the how, where, and when to do your best work. The real challenge lies in changing the human behaviors on your team, yourself included, to have true *remote work fluency*: something we define as having the right skills, behaviors, and mindset to easily navigate work in an anytime, anywhere environment as if it is second nature.

Fundamentally, remote work puts a magnifying glass on all aspects of an organization: the good, the bad, and the ugly. We believe the bad and the ugly are merely areas to improve and problems to solve. While we don't claim to have *all* the answers, we do believe in *you*—a competent, capable, and creative human being.

That's why *Remote Works* leans on reflection questions, expert interviews, group activities, and stories so that you can cocreate the best remote work life for yourself and your team—along with us, chapter by chapter. No special software needed. No complex reorganizational plan required.

Last but not least, we want you to know that we live and breathe what we preach, even beyond our combined two decades spent working in distributed environments at places such as Automattic and DuckDuckGo. The last time we saw each other “in real life,” before embarking on this writing journey, was in February 2019 in Mexico City. We were roommates for a month while organizing remote working salons.

The idea for this book came up during a casual catch-up while in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. We saw midlevel managers struggling, and executive teams didn't know how to help, given they were also unfamiliar with remote work. We saw them largely



copy and paste traditional ways of working into a virtual environment. And then we got to work.

Our biggest fear was that the promise of remote work would be taken away for future generations of knowledge workers due to failed experimentation before most people even got to experience the true benefits: Seemingly simple benefits like creating our workdays around our natural energy peaks and valleys, and enjoying the freedom of choice in our schedule and locations. Bigger benefits too. Because of remote work, we found our partners, developed meaningful relationships, learned from other cultures, improved our health, and had the opportunity to work with some of the best and brightest people from around the world.

We've spent time teaching people on the fundamental questions you should be asking if you are committed to exploring remote options for your team. Many of those questions are woven throughout these pages. We found that once you start questioning, there is no stopping. With remote work, you open the doors to redefine work-life balance, success, and so much more!

We created this book for you and your team, each writing from our corners of the world. With multiple versions of stories in Google Docs, WhatsApp threads, and Asana tasks, we've strengthened our own remote working muscles as well. (Trust us, there's always room for improvement.) We became even more confident that remote work fluency is here to stay. Strong remote work skills will improve your work game, even if you decide to be colocated part of the time. We are excited to share everything we have learned.

Saddle up. Let's get started.

*Ali & Tam*

## INTRODUCTION

# README— A Guide to *Remote Works*

IT CAN TAKE some people a lifetime, but for Michael Judge, it took less than three months to see through the mirage of corporate life and spot its main culprit: bad management.

After graduating with a degree in physics from the University of California, San Diego, in 1985, Michael headed to the optimistic land of Silicon Valley to work as an engineer at a start-up video card company. It didn't last long. But he did leave with an insight that would one day manifest as a box-office sleeper, turned cult classic, turned cultural milestone—*Office Space*.<sup>1</sup>

The movie hit a chord with the American public—surprising given the mainstream hypothesis that people watch movies to *escape* their mundane lives, not relive them. We believe that *Office Space* gave people a mirror to understand their work lives, including what frustrates them—like the infamous manager popping up unexpectedly in their cubicle (yet again) to ask for that (incredibly unnecessary) TPS report.

So, what does this have to do with *Remote Works*? Isn't this a book for managers and their teams?

OK, please don't put down the book yet! Yes, this is a book about work.

And yes, we believe that management is incredibly important.

We've taken the brief from Michael Judge. Bad management is a *real* problem. We believe there's a better way—and that bad management caused by the shift to remote work can be prevented. We want to help you avoid becoming one of the Bobs!

## HOW TO READ *REMOTE WORKS*

There are many ways to interact with *Remote Works*. We present concepts in various ways because we know that each reader learns differently.

Think of us as your asynchronous remote work coaches. We are here to guide you and help you strengthen your remote work muscles. We are *not* here to tell you what to do in a step-by-step guide, expecting you to do everything we say (in the correct order).

We believe *great* remote teams come in all shapes and sizes. Regardless of whether you work at a start-up or the largest multinational organization in the world, these principles stay the same because they are focused on the team level. Ultimately, they require customizing remote work principles to your team's unique personality. Only you know that best.

It is up to you to choose your own adventure. So if you find yourself in chapter 8 thinking to yourself, "Oh no . . . not another table," feel free to skip the table and read one of the real-life stories from our experts instead. (Or go ahead and fill out the table. You may be surprised by what you learn from it.) Whether you prefer learning by doing, learning through others, or learning by self-inquiry, we have you covered!

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Ready to get started? Here is what you can expect while reading *Remote Works*:

1. **TL;DR:** Each chapter starts with a section called TL;DR, which stands for “Too Long; Didn’t Read,” highlighting three to five skills you will unlock by reading the chapter. Think of this section as an anchor; it can help you navigate the book if you prefer to skip around. Plus, the TL;DR is a remote work best practice for documentation. Whether writing up notes or creating a project plan, the TL;DR is a way to summarize content up front for the audience. They can then choose whether it makes sense to dive into the details. (What can we say? We love to practice what we preach.)
2. **Exercises and How-tos:** You’ll find several interactive exercises that you can do solo or with your team. Anytime you see an exercise starting with “RW” (shorthand for *Remote Works*), it’s something we’ve created especially for you. You can do the exercises directly in the book (grab a pen!) or access more online resources at [remoteworksbook.com](https://remoteworksbook.com).
3. **Spotlight Stories and Experts:** We interviewed more than 30 remote work leaders about their experiences. We highlight their stories as “spotlights” throughout the book. You can learn from others by seeing how they’ve approached similar situations. Since we frequently quote and share stories from our experts, we give their name and occasionally their company. You can find a complete list of our remote work leaders at the back of the book in the “Experts” section.
4. **Reflection Questions:** After each concept, you’ll find reflection questions to help you apply the learnings to your work life. We recommend that you continue to muse over them, perhaps on a long walk or during a shower. (Come on, this is where