

Top Agency talent

How to attract, treat, and retain the best of the best.



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Why talent is more valuable than ever

Every day we are moving towards a world that is both more efficient and more digital than any sci-fi cartoon from the 70s could have predicted. One of the forces at the helm of this digital revolution is the creative, design, and web agencies that are facilitating this change for everyone else.



Whether it's by helping businesses that previously had no digital presence be represented in the digital space or taking established businesses and expanding their opportunities with new online solutions... the role that agencies play is undeniable.

But to try and fuel this innovation, the agencies need a constant supply of developers to fill a multitude of general and specialist roles. And while the demand for developers is at an all-time high, the quantity in both University graduates and self-trained professionals is not even close to enough.



Multiple [surveys](#) of over the last couple of years have pointed at a worldwide shortage in developers. The top three issues software businesses face are a mix of:

- Not having enough people
- Sharing experience across seniority levels
- Hiring suitable candidates

With [almost 9 out of 10 IT businesses](#) saying that hiring new talent is "hard" (and 36% calling it "very hard"), it's starting to become evident that calling this a developer shortage might be an understatement.

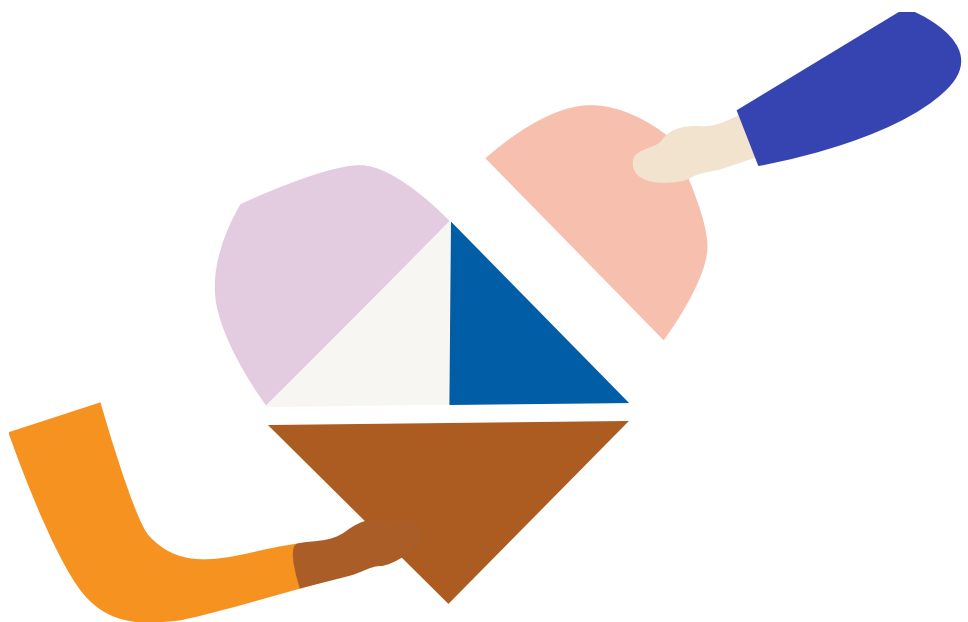
Recruiters often refer to this situation somewhere along the lines of: "worldwide developer shortage crisis". So if hyperboles are on the table, what if you wanted to make your recruitment even more selective? If you don't want to settle for just having any ol' developer, but instead, you want to attract the top talent in the industry, with all the perks they might bring to your agency. Well then, you must be prepared to rethink or tweak some things about the way you operate.

If that sounds like a hassle, or you already have a team filled with top of the line developers, you might want to think about retention instead because **employee turnover costs you more than you know**, both directly and indirectly:

- Teams that are in constant flux and have an unstable structure are obviously going to be less productive
- The employees that leave are always going to leave with crucial experience/knowledge that is completely removed from the company
- The brand might get damaged from bad reviews on employer-rating sites and word of mouth, or bad press in general
- The cost of losing an employee can range anywhere from 16% to 213% of their annual salary [in some cases!](#)

Now that talented developers are more scarce than ever... you might be wondering:

How does one identify this "top talent"? And once you've done so, how do you recruit, onboard and retain them?



What is top talent?

Before we start our deep dive into the obvious and not-so-obvious ways of attracting and retaining top talent, let's take a moment to define:

What exactly is top talent?

Top talent is one of those terms that does not have a clear cut definition that people can point to. However, when talking about the agency world, there are certain characteristics that come up time and time again when discussing high performers:

- **Skill** - The go-to metric for determining top talent. Whether it's due to natural talent or 10,000 hours of practice, if someone is exceptionally skilled, they are on the best possible path to be considered top talent at any agency.
- **Ambition** - The goal to become the top of their field. Ambition drives people to always keep up with the newest trends and developments in their field and continuously improve their skills.
- **Integrity** - When they say something will get done, it gets done at all costs. And if both the managers and team members know they can count on someone when the going gets tough, that person becomes irreplaceable.
- **Communication** - Knowing how to clearly communicate with managers and executives that speak the language of money on one side, while communicating with the technical team members who speak in code and high fidelity mockups on the other is a skill that should be paid in gold.
- **Teamwork** - Everyone can excel at their individual tasks, but sharing a task or working efficiently in a team is a must-have for those that want to become the top performers in any agency
- **Creativity** - Some creatives are a constant source of ideas during a brainstorming session. Some always see a problem from 3 more angles than everyone else. And while creativity manifests in a lot of ways, sometimes it's the main thing behind a person's top-talent status.



- **Leadership** - Leadership is not just a skill for managers or team leads. People who join fresh out of college can find themselves at the top of the pyramid in any team within a few months, even with no direct effort. If an individual is approachable, facilitates a good workflow, or solves problems with a leveled head, they will soon become respected by their peers as a leader, even with no title involved.



- **Devotion** - The green "you can talk to me"-light next to the monitor turns red. The headphones go on. 6 hours, 3 cups of coffee, 1 missed lunch, and a single stretching session later, one individual just saved a 10-person project from being one week late. That's how people become legends. And top talent.



Being considered top talent does not mean that a person has to have all of these qualities fully formed. It doesn't even mean that top talent and top performers have to achieve all of these qualities eventually. A person who fully masters 3-4 of these qualities should quickly rise to become a prime asset to any agency. And if your agency finds itself hiring a person that displays most or all of these qualities, then you should do everything you can to keep them around until they decide it's time to retire.

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment. Love it or hate it, this is where it all starts if you want to attract top talent for your agency. But there's so much more to recruitment than job postings and hiring recruiters. It's in the recruitment phase that the first bit of onboarding starts. While it is 100% the candidate's responsibility to find out as much as possible about the agency he wants to join, why not show your values and culture even at the earliest stages and make it easier for them?



We are drawn to leaders and organizations that are good at communicating what they believe. Their ability to make us feel like we belong, to make us feel special, safe and not alone is part of what gives them the ability to inspire us

- Simon Sinek, Author of "Start with Why"

It's no secret that even the most basic one-page websites have an "about us" section. But imagine being a top talent developer or specialist looking for new opportunities. They might go through 50 "about us" pages every day. Does your mission and vision statement stand out of the crowd? Do you communicate having a culture that provides a constant stream of challenging problems to solve? Do you have a hilarious video of your founder switching places with your human-sized-rabbit-office-mascot and shooting confetti at your unsuspecting support staff?



UMBRACO TIP

Do you want to show your values to potential clients? Then video is the way to go. It doesn't have to be a big production - the only thing it has to do, is to show your company values and culture.

Here's how we do it: <https://vimeo.com/251773284>

Letting your mission, vision and culture shine through in your recruiting process helps you immensely in not only standing out from the crowd, but also in attracting the right people for your company.



Personality vs. skills

Before we get any further it's time to address the tiny elephant in the room: **What's more important - personality or skills?**

To answer that question, you only need to scroll back up a few pages to find our list of characteristics for top talent. Notice how **there's only 1 called skill, while the rest are primarily based on personality?**

That's no coincidence. While skill alone is incredibly important, it's what makes them capable of doing their job after all, it's not necessarily the thing that makes them **top talent**. If they are an amazing coder, but can't be depended on to meet deadlines or have issues working together with their team, it's hard to call them top talent.

At the end of the day it's important to remember that skills can be taught and improved, but personality and culture can't. And if you want your entire team to perform - not just the individual - it's important to have the right mix of personalities and culture. If the right culture is there, you'll see skills improve for everyone and soon you'll have a team full of top talent that performs day in and day out.



UMBRACO TIP

For 99 % of our job postings we use this to highlight our people-first focus:

"We care about people. That's why the most important qualification is your personality: who you are, what values you have and how you interact with other people. We are looking for people with passion and energy to be part of something bigger than themselves and who are willing to dedicate their time and skills towards building great products and services in collaboration with talented and friendly colleagues."

Career page

A good starting point for your "first point of recruitment" (not the first point of contact, because that's probably your landing page) is to create a clear value proposition for the inbound job candidates. Until your agency reaches a certain size, you can't cater to everyone's wishes concerning work-life balance. Your hiring decisions should always be based on a cultural fit more than a technical fit.

While technical skills are clearly important, it's much easier to improve a skill than it is to change a personality. If we want to go into specifics, we can go back to the user experience analogy. When writing a value proposition on the careers page, you need to think about what kind of agency you really are.



"We are looking for dedicated people to help bring the most innovative web solutions to life for our clients by day, and help us put up new shelves for all these awards by night..."



That statement will attract a certain kind of people:

- Fresh graduates with a lot of ambition looking for validation of their skills
- Experienced professionals who want an environment for their talents to be utilized
- People looking for a challenge and don't even consider crunch time a negative word
- Career-building professionals who are looking for a place that gets them more awards to their resume
- People who live for their jobs and look forward to evenings and Saturdays at the office filled with pizza and fixing the kinks in the code

Then on the other side of the spectrum, you could have:

" You bring the talent, we bring the perks. At AUE Inc. (Agency Used as an Example), we value strategy and planning above everything else. And thanks to our in-depth research and planning, clients always get the solution they need, instead of the solution they think they want. This also means that our employees never have to worry about scope creep or staying at work past 5 PM. Oh, and did we mention possibilities of working from home or the 4 day work week?"

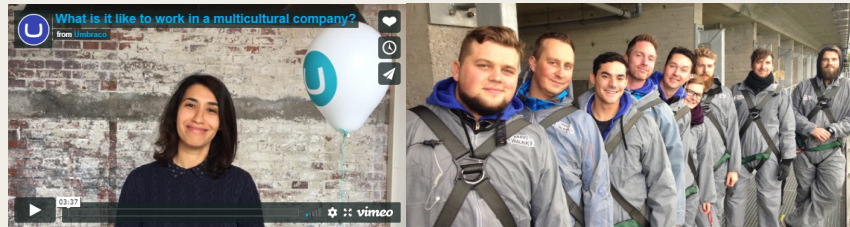
A few sentences like this on your career page could go a long way towards attracting people that:

- Love their jobs, but don't want to sacrifice time with their family for work
- Are perfect for the job, but would have had to relocate or travel multiple hours every day
- Are motivated for the job, but also have other ambitions and are trying to run some sort of side-hustle or project on the side



UMBRACO TIP

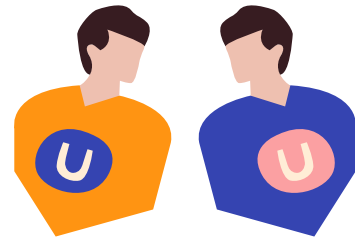
Sections like "International Workplace" or "Fun Squad" shows that we care about an open and fun work environment, where your colleagues also become your friends. [Take a look.](#)



Job posting

It's fair to assume that people who can be considered top talent in their respective disciplines probably got there through a combination of hard work, dedication, and professionalism. Then it would be more than fair if they expect the same qualities from their potential new employer.

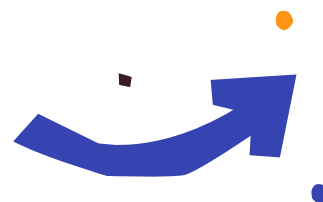
This is why you need to have an in-depth look at every part of the job posting, so both parties know if they are a match even before they finally meet face to face.



Takes one to know one

Agencies have a lot of ways to get new talent in the door. You might do all the recruitment in-house, outsource it to a headhunter/recruiter or grow to a point where a dedicated HR department or in-house recruitment person is the way to go.

But no matter which option is the most viable for you, **always keep the cultural fit in mind.** You might find out that the person with the most extensive resume might be too far in their career to adapt to the workflow that works for the rest of the team. There are also cases of people with less impressive qualifications, who fit in so well with the rest of the team, that they hit the ground running and start producing work way above their estimated skill-level right away.



Making your agency a cultural paradise for top talent pays off in more than one way:

- On one hand, you will attract those who have already proven to be top talent, which can give the quality and speed of work an instant boost. And if they are the ones who come to you looking to join, you'll have a much larger talent pool to choose from.
- On the other hand, you will be nurturing potential top performers from their career infancy and help them grow into top talent with the right personality traits to perform at your company. That has a ROI that can only be beaten by time travelers going back in time and buying stocks in Apple.

This whole train of thought is where agencies might learn something from the world of sports, where it's a common philosophy in some football clubs (or soccer if that's the term you prefer to use):



"We don't sign superstars, we make them".

- Arsène Wenger, Manager of the Arsenal F.C.

Source: [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk)

Image source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arsène_Wenger)

But how do you make sure that your candidates are a cultural fit? And how can you make sure that they can do the work once they get hired?

Contrary to what you might think from our previous arguments about "personality > skills", it's important to start with the skills first. At the end of the day you need to know which skills you're looking for before you can start evaluating personality and cultural fit.

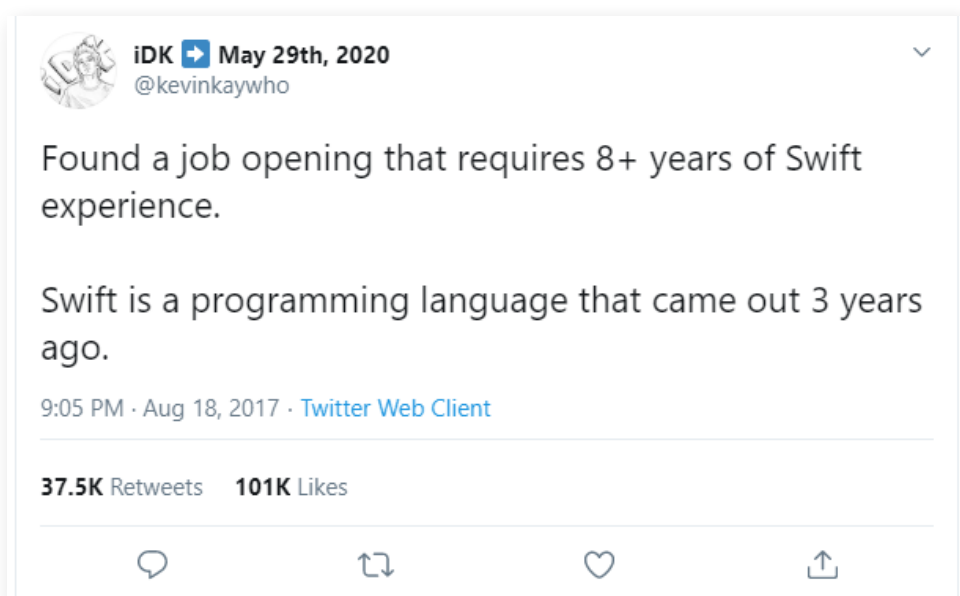
When the hiring process is handled by the department or team that is looking for a new member, the senior members or managers are usually in charge of the process. If there is an obvious need for a specialist that the team doesn't yet have, creating the requirements should be as easy as simply writing down the tasks that need to be done and translating them into skills. However, if there is just more work coming in for a specific skill set (UX, .NET Developer, etc.), the existing team members should be consulted so that the new hire can complement their skill set.

Once you are settled on the skills it's time to consider the personality you're looking for. Are you looking for a person with an extraordinary drive to grind it out 50 hours a week? Or maybe a true team player that makes everyone around them better? There's no right or wrong answers here - but it's important to have an idea of which personalities you're looking for.

The tone of voice varies from agency to agency and even from team to team, and the structure of a job posting can vary quite a bit. But there are still some evergreen tips that could save you and potential candidates some time:



- When a job has language or certification requirements that make or break the application, start with those
- Don't get caught up in the technical requirements and skills needed for the job.
- Present the personality traits you are looking for on equal footing with skills, education and experience
- When dealing with entry-level jobs, a portfolio of work could be supplemented with school projects that have a similar scope
- Don't put unnecessary year requirements on non-senior jobs
- With software that has a steeper learning curve, ask for a specific platform that your team uses (Sketch/Adobe XD/InVision) instead of listing experience with prototyping software in general
- Don't ask for 8 years of experience in a language that has been around for 3 years



The interview

Generally, tech companies started adopting "a multiple interview approach" that not only gives applicants a coding test or some homework, but also goes over their background and culture fit in the same depth. More and more agencies are now doing the same. This is where our hiring journey once again splits into two paths, this time, based on if you chose the internal hiring strategy or the headhunter/recruiter strategy.

The recruiter can take care of the searching, first impressions and the technical fit, but you should always have the most promising candidates meet the current team for a short and sweet meet and greet before you consider hiring them.



If the agency conducts the entire hiring process in-house, there is a lot of leeway in the process. Try new approaches and strategies, and eventually, you will find what works for you. But if you want a hint from a company that put culture first and has been doing so for 15 years, **here's how we do it at Umbraco:**

- 1. Collaborative effort to identify skills required.** Once we are sure we need a new addition to a department, the team goes over the exact skills we are looking for. This ensures that the team knows which new skills are coming in, instead of a manager deciding it themselves.
- 2. Job posting.** When the manager has the final job posting ready, it is posted and shared online internally as well as externally. We know the value of a good network, so employees from all departments are asked to share it with anyone they might think is a good fit. To help gauge personality in the first screening process we usually ask for a short video introduction, along with a resumé, just to get an idea of who you are as a person even before we meet you.
- 3. Screening of candidates.** As soon as we have enough candidates, the first screening process starts. This consists of sorting out any that does not have the required skills or did not adequately show that they would be a good cultural fit.
- 4. First interview.** All candidates that pass our first screening are invited to a first interview. The purpose of the first interview is to get to know them as a person and figure out if they would be a good cultural fit. This includes having a current team member talk to them for 10 minutes one-on-one, without those involved with the hiring present. If the personality is a match to our culture, they are given homework and invited to a second interview

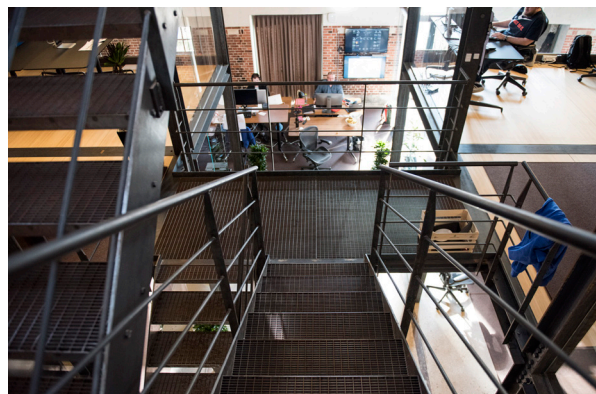
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4. **Homework.** While the first interview is focused on the cultural fit, the second is about technical skills. And to judge that, each candidate is given homework to complete before the second interview. This consists of various work-related tasks where they have a chance to showcase their skills. The homework also includes writing a movie review. This is an added curveball to see how they approach problem solving of tasks they probably haven't done since high school.
 5. **Second interview.** We have the second interview to go over the homework and technical questions. This is where their skills are assessed and the main goal is to ensure that the chosen candidate has the necessary skills to handle the tasks they would be given in the position.
 6. **Hiring.** After the second round of interviews it is often clear which candidate is the best cultural fit and whether or not they have the necessary skills.

Now that you're done recruiting and have hired the right person, the real work starts: **onboarding**. Hiring the right candidate is one thing; but if you don't manage to give them a proper onboarding experience they will not perform as well as they could. **Onboarding is the first step towards nurturing top talent.**

Onboarding that rocks

Onboarding a new person to the team is a masterclass in taking your own medicine for a lot of agencies. Every good agency prides itself on an in-depth understanding of user journeys and user experience, but what is the experience of joining your agency like?

Placing someone behind a desk, giving them access to your password manager, and asking them to start developing right away is the equivalent of ordering a pizza and giving the delivery guy just your zip code. It takes so much more, and a good onboarding experience can make or break your company's ability to foster new top talent.

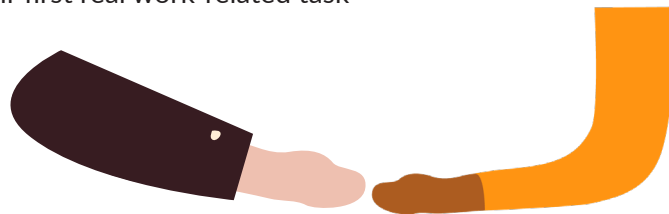


Who knows how many times you will walk down these stairs to get coffee?

Day one onboarding

There are many things a person needs to know on their first day at a company. And there are a lot of things that they will definitely not remember. To prevent information overload, it's preferable to keep some essential things for the rest of the week so the fresh hire will pick them all up eventually. So what should they know on their first day?

1. Give them an **"onboarding buddy"**. This should be someone from their team, who they can ask any and all questions to, without feeling like you are bothering them
2. The values or the **"WHY"** of the company
3. The names of their closest coworkers
4. The tech stack your department is using
5. Where to find the best coffee machine in the building, as well as any other refreshments they can get (fruit, cold water, etc.)
6. How the company intranet or CMS works
7. The most efficient way to get to their desk
8. The information and communication flow of your company (emails, chat, phone calls, etc.)
9. Where the bathrooms are (you'd be surprised how often this is an issue)
10. What task management solution your team uses to keep track of tasks
11. When lunch is
12. Their first real work-related task



That's about it, any other information would probably be too much, and as we all know, if you go for a handshake tour with every department immediately, you forget the first person's name while shaking the third one's hand.

Week one onboarding

1. Handshake tour with the other departments
2. Task delivery process
3. Deep-dive into project management processes and frameworks
4. Company events and workout/sports sessions
5. Slowly dive deeper into company history and purpose
6. The best practice with your team's current tech stack
7. How your department influences the other departments
8. How your tech stack integrates/communicates with other departments

Naturally, no versatile solution is one-size-fits-all, by definition. And onboarding definitely shouldn't stop after 1 week. To fully succeed with onboarding it's important to remember that it's a process that never quite stops. And if possible, the initial onboarding process should turn into a longer onboarding journey, where new employees also improve their skills. This could both be internal as well as external courses and sessions.



UMBRACO TIP

At Umbraco our onboarding journey lasts 3-6 months (based on the position and time of year they join) and includes various sessions, presentations and courses. We send all employees through communication courses as well as our own web development training courses (even the non-developers in our company). Our onboarding flow is built to ensure that all employees have the universal skills that they need - no matter which department they're going to be in.

So, let's boil it down. What are the main pointers that will ensure that you have an onboarding that rocks?

- Give them an onboarding buddy that can do their hardest to take away the shyness/awkwardness of the first days
- Help them to learn what your company is all about and why they should get behind what you are doing...
- ...without overloading them with useless information that they would not remember anyway
- Give them a task on the first day, but don't try to give them the entire framework/process all at once
- Plan out short onboarding meetings/presentations to give everyone just the "need to know" instead of the "nice to know" about every team and project/product

But most importantly:

Do your best to make them feel like part of the team from day one



Hiring and onboarding new employees is one thing. But as we know, the costs of employee turnover is high. If you don't work on having a great environment where your employees thrive, then it's going to be very costly for you to keep replacing everyone.

Employees changing jobs is impossible to stop - especially in the tech industry - but there are things you can do to keep your turnover rate low.

Culture

This ebook could just be called "culture in the agency space" because that is the true key to acquiring and keeping top talent.



But what is company culture?

The 17-word, aka the short answer: Company culture is the combination of all the values, social interactions, and psychological behavior in an organization.

The 340-word, aka the long answer:

Company culture is hard to define in specific terms, because unlike most essential things in business, it is entirely intangible, a feeling. Branding is closely intertwined with culture in every interaction that the company makes with any of its outside stakeholders. And if you want your brand to be consistent across all channels, you have to work towards a work culture that aligns with your corporate messaging.

A brand is a reflection of your company in the minds of your stakeholders.

That is why it takes on new forms in every piece of content shared on social media, every meeting with a possible client, and every shared lunch break with Debbie from the agency next door. A brand consists of many moving parts, some tangible, some not. The tangible can be boiled down to visual identity, messaging, and imagery, if need be. These can all be changed with a new set of guidelines, a new designer, or a new marketing department, but how do you control a culture?

Culture is not just a code of conduct, communication strategy, or a list of processes. Company culture includes all the small details:

- The tone of voice the CEO uses to address a reporter while discussing a new acquisition
- If your employees feel comfortable to talk about non-work related issues with their manager
- If the new sales intern feels like waking up in the morning on his second week on the job

And that's why culture is one of the hardest things to get right in an agency, as it can not be acquired, mandated or forced.

Culture has to be built and continuously monitored and maintained.

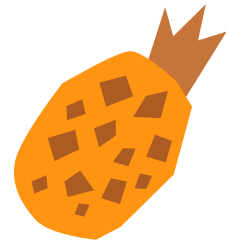
You can tell a lot about an agency culture:

- In the way, your company treats employees, customers and the surrounding community
- In the degree that your employees are committed to the company values and goals
- By how comfortable employees are with innovating, making decisions and expressing their opinions
- In how information is broadcasted from one department to another and from the higher-ups to the lower-level employees

We have created a list of things that will have the biggest impact on your culture:

Freedom

Freedom is often hailed as the ultimate solution to happy employees. But most people have an easier time being creative when there are some restrictions in place.



Example: If your agency needs you to write as many slogans as possible selling pineapples in the next 10 minutes. When do you think you will produce more?

A) If the 10 minutes is the only restriction.

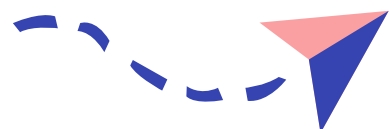
B) If you have a 10 minute restriction, you cannot use the word pineapple and all the slogans have to be under 10 words or less?

***Studies** show that B is the right answer - even though you have more freedom in A.*

Sidenote: We tried it at our office and we are currently considering a new venture in "Spikey yellow fruit" advertising.

So does this prove that freedom may not be the answer to an infinitely creative and productive workplace culture?

Of course not - because we had the freedom to choose those restrictions.



Client expectations and agency needs dictate the tasks that have to be solved. Every agency also needs to have some time and budget restrictions to prevent a project getting out of hand.

Other than that, the freedom to solve the problem in any way possible is one of the most significant benefits you can grant your employees:

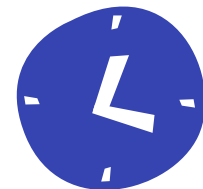
- The most efficient way to a problem takes all the learning and experimentation out of the process
- Using less billable hours and achieving maximum efficiency will inevitably mean that the client should probably expect cookie-cutter deliverables instead of innovative solutions
- If there is a framework, guideline or brand book for everything, proposing new solutions and approaches might be perceived as too much of a hassle to even suggest



If you find the perfect balance in the above, you should have the **How** and **Why** of task management covered. But freedom in the workplace is a complicated thing. The **How and Why** are questions that have to be answered or the work will never get done. But why not take more weight off of people's shoulders by not having them stress over the **When and Where** as well?

Is "When and Where" Important?

Allowing for a full five-day remote work schedule is not something that can be implemented instantly, it's something that agencies have to build towards over time.



For a large portion of agencies, a full week of remote work might not even make sense at all. But giving people the freedom to work from home as needed on special occasions can remove a lot of unnecessary stress.

If a person needs to take care of some errands, look after the kids, or maybe they are not feeling well enough to drive to the office, but well enough to work, **why not have the option of working from home?**

Let's say you have a single developer dedicated to taking care of your agency website. He has tasks that he doesn't actively collaborate with anyone else on. He gets a mockup of the website, some copy, and gets to work. He might also be actively trying to sell his apartment. In most companies, this would mean that he has to run back and forth between the apartment and the office, sometimes multiple times a day, to deal with the buyers, real estate agents and contractors. **But does he really have to?**

Would it not be more comfortable for him to stay at home and work between meetings? And would it not make it easier for his team members and managers not to have to keep track of his travel schedule? And if the work gets done in the right time frame, does his physical presence at the office really matter? We discuss this further in “Is it time to go fully remote?” (Page 34)

U **UMBRACO TIP**

At Umbraco, everyone has a setup that allows for secure remote work, and in case of sickness, family emergencies, schoolwork or other unforeseen events, they are always welcome to work from home. We give people the benefit of the doubt / assume positive intent, and so far, it has always paid off.

Personal and professional growth

Every movie about an office work environment has managed to, in one way or another, demonize the monotony of sitting at a cubicle doing the same work every single day. And who can blame them? Doing the same thing over and over again is widely referred to as **the definition of insanity.**



No one wants to feel like they aren't progressing in their job. And this rings especially true when we are talking about top talent. If someone wants to stay at the top (where you probably want to keep them), they need to continually have an eye on the newest developments in their field.

The information gathering and processing is on them - **allowing for an environment where they can test new ideas, that's on the agency.**

There are many ways to help talented employees fuel their passion for their work. Every person is looking for something different, but here are a few ideas that should be universally interesting for most people:

Personal growth

Courses and conferences: There are always new books and courses popping up, covering the latest and greatest developments in the industry.

If your top performers ask about you helping fund their education, it's one of the best ways to show them that you are counting on them in the future.

Maybe there is a developer conference coming up that would help them meet some like minded people and gather industry knowledge?

While it may seem like a big investment to send one or multiple developers away for a few days, the new knowledge and energy they bring back will pay dividends now as well as in the future. If they have valid arguments for going, why not give it a shot?

Schools and degrees: A similar approach to the one about courses and conferences, to an even higher degree (forgive the pun), should be taken if an employee asks about the possibility of returning to school.

Maybe they got this job straight after finishing their bachelor's degree. Maybe they want to go for a manager position and think that an MBA would greatly improve their outlook.

Or maybe they want to slowly transition to another position, but wish to stay at the agency. Customer lifetime value and return on investment are some of the most important metrics that agencies need to keep an eye out. But try to imagine the "employee lifetime value", of someone who you helped put through school.

Professional growth

A promotion: While most talented people love what they do, as they repeat the same tasks day after day, eventually, they will find ways of improving the process or get ideas for new ventures that the team should pursue. And there is only so much one can do from the bottom of the corporate ladder. Career growth is a key part of goal setting strategies for high performers and agencies need to provide these opportunities if they want to retain their top talent. Otherwise those people might look for those higher positions elsewhere. Please note, that a "regular" promotion is not always the best option; we'll cover that later in our section "Non-linear progression" (Page 24)

A raise: Usually going hand in hand with a promotion. However, while every promotion should come with a raise, not every raise has to come with a promotion. Many people are not after the responsibility that comes with a promotion, they just like what they do, and so they take on more tasks, spend more time at the office or even work weekends. But maybe they aren't looking to delegate their tasks to their would-be replacements. Maybe they just want to feel like their extra time is seen as valuable by the agency. And seeing as time is money, sometimes the answer is as simple as that.

While all of the above will probably make your agency employees happy and get your agency valuable, educated and dedicated employees for a long time to come, there are also smaller ways to improve productivity faster.

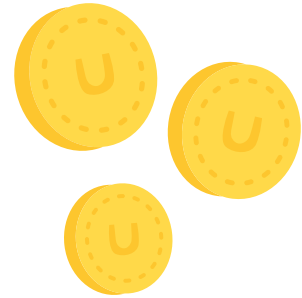


Investment

You have to spend money to make money. **And you have to invest in top talent to retain top talent.**

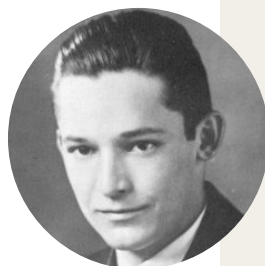
Achieving maximum focus in an office setting where a million things are gunning for your attention is tough.

All of that can be managed with a good work culture and processes. But if you don't have the right equipment and tools, you'll never be as efficient as you could be.



Maybe a chair is not comfortable. Maybe you can still hear your sales team in the other room, even with your headphones on. Maybe you found a SaaS tool that would save you hours upon hours of repetitive tasks.

If someone asks for a new keyboard, new tool, or new screen, it's never a good idea to dismiss them right away. The person asking rarely brings up an issue like this on a whim, it has to be premeditated in some way, and that means that the problem they are facing is a recurring one.



"The way management treats their associates is exactly how the associates will treat the customers."

- Sam Walton, Founder of Walmart

Image source: [Wikipedia](#)

A one-time investment, no matter how large, is actually pretty small when looking at it as a long term investment in focus and productivity. If an agency shows that it cares about its employees in all the ways that matter, the employees will return it multiple times over. Here are some small or large things in no particular order that could make or break an employee relationship with the company:

- **IT equipment.** If you ask someone to work in front of a computer 8 hours each day, you better make sure they have the proper equipment to do their job. This includes everything from computer equipment to noise-cancelling headphones and online tools to do their job.
- **Chair and desk.** This one is connected to the one above; spending a third of their day in uncomfortable working conditions will severely hurt their productivity and health.

- **Coffee, refreshments and snacks.** We know it might not sound like much, but making sure that your employees have access to all the basics like coffee, cold water (or soda) and some fruit can drastically increase their productivity and improve health.
- **Indoor climate.** The stereotype of a developer might be: someone sitting in a dark basement with a hoodie on - but nothing could be further from the truth if you want them to be productive. Proper lighting, some plants and good ventilation are all tiny details that have a huge impact.

Are you having any fun?

Fun is a fickle thing. Everyone inherently knows what fun is, but if you had to define fun at the workplace, it would not be as easy as it first sounds. Looking up the definition of fun will also get you reprimanded by the dictionary (see exhibit A), and there is no one sure way to define it. The only sure thing is that if the most interesting thing at the office on the first day is the photocopier, the new employee getting the tour will probably start looking for another job during the lunch break.

Exhibit A
Source: [Urban Dictionary](#)



Fun

Clearly something that you **arent** having if you're **searching** it **on here**.

*Guy one: **Wanna go** to a party tonight?*

*Guy two: **NO!***

*Guy one: **WHY?!***

*Guy two: Because **I'm looking** for fun on the **interent**.*

The overall feeling of fun at the workplace impacts productivity. And so it's a topic without any specific bullet points, but a topic to think about and discuss nonetheless.

If you want to have fun at the workplace but can't manage to play chess on one screen while maintaining your focus on coding... or your keyboard shortcut hand is also your balloon tying and juggling hand... you will probably need to interact with other people eventually. But there is only a limited level of friendship and camaraderie that you can build with people when talking about code and sending each other design files.

When was the last time someone asked a different water cooler question than: "So, how was the weekend/any plans for the weekend?" In most agencies, it has probably been a while. And that's expected. If you work in a consistent and focused environment, there are only so many topics that can come to mind.

But if you change up the setting, if you do different activities together, you might build more than just classic coworker bonds. You might build friendships. And what could be nicer than looking forward to Monday morning at the office to see your friends?

But not everyone comes to work looking for friendship. Especially top performers who just want to put on their headphones and forget that they are in an office environment.

Sadly headphones run out of battery, the wifi goes down, and progress meetings exist. Eventually, even the most focused people have to talk to their coworkers. And since you spend most of your day at work, people would prefer to cut down on the dry, corporate jargon and instead discuss or do something... fun.



This again brings us to the topic of shared values. The job of a back-end developer and the job of a UX designer require different personalities. So if your agency wants to have a varied offering of skills and backgrounds, you will have to find values that connect with every group. But not just the "standard" values that are put on the agency "about us" page. The values that make up the constantly evolving personality of your agency. If you do this, you will eventually have an agency full of like minded individuals that don't need to act corporate 24/7 and might even joke around from time to time.

Sadly, there is a thin line between having fun at the workplace and being overly quirky and disrupting everyone's work. Unfortunately, you can also never get full value-alignment with every person that has been hired. But an agency where people think of each other as nothing more than colleagues and only spend time together at work is an agency that will have trouble scaling and keeping up with the more friendly teams later on.

Your culture and environment both have an impact on the quality of your work. See the events section a bit below for some team building ideas. (Page 31)

Non-linear progression

When hearing the words "non-linear", if your mind immediately jumps towards video games, you already sort of get the point.

In a non-linear game progression system, you start at the same spot as every other player. But when you arrive at a crossroads, instead of going straight down the first path like you usually would, you get to choose if you want to go left, right, or even take a step back and see if you can get to your current position again, by taking another path. This progression helps you pick up new skills and new experiences that will make the path ahead much easier.



This is also how the current trend in career progression looks. Companies no longer expect people to stay in the same career path for decades, slowly working their way up the corporate ladder. This rings especially true for agencies, where skills from different career paths transfer almost seamlessly and complement each other with a broader outlook on the problems being solved.

As an example, if you have a frontend developer who discovered she likes designing more than she likes coding, you should give her a chance because:



- She already knows the limitations that code can have on some designs
- She can design with systems and reusable assets in mind
- She can give better estimates on project length and the overall development time
- If she wants to progress further into something like art direction, the added coding skills are always a plus when communicating to both clients and developers alike

If your agency has people who have invested in their craft to the point where they are considered experts, top talent, or masters, their progression will eventually hit a plateau.

And while just existing at the top and using your skills to their full potential is a fantastic feeling... ultimately, the need for self-improvement and innovation that got them to the top of the talent pool will make them want to progress further. But you can't really go further up than the top, so where do you go?

This is where people start considering switching jobs or pursuing entrepreneurship because it seems like the only challenging way forward.

The classic solution to this "problem" is to promote them to the management level. Clearly, if someone is performing exceptionally well as a specialist they will automatically become an exceptional manager... Right?

The solution is not always that simple and pushing someone to become a manager (or a manager of a bigger team than before) is not for everyone. Some top talent enjoy being a specialist and would rather spend their time performing their tasks, than managing a team.



"In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence."

- Laurence J. Peter, Author of The Peter Principle

Image source: [bcbooklook](https://www.bcbooklook.com)

The previous quote refers to what is known as the Peter principle, a concept of management developed by Laurence J. Peter. The principle suggests that people tend to get promoted outside of their skillset and competence, based on previous success.

Meaning: Your best front-end developer is first and foremost... a front-end developer. Having 10 award-winning projects under his belt does not make him an instant candidate for managing the next project. That requires knowledge of front-end and an additional management skill set, lack of which could lead to disaster down the line.

The modern solution to the problem is working with non-linear progression and promotion. Instead of the career path only going one way - towards management - you can set an alternative path. This could be anything from giving your top talent more influence on projects or a seat at the table when tough decisions are made to simply giving more freedom to perform tasks their own way. Once you start thinking outside the box you'll be amazed at the possibilities there are for non-linear progression.

And the result?

Happier top talent that gets a truly unique position at your agency, which they won't be able to find anywhere else.



UMBRACO TIP

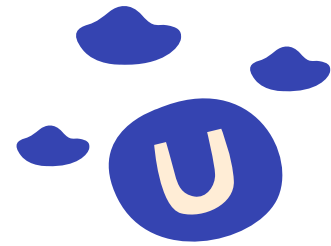
At Umbraco, most of our junior employees start out in the SWAT (Support warrior and troubleshooter) department, helping our users with day to day issues. This helps them naturally and quickly get an overview of all the other departments, the products, and how everything fits together. Later they can choose to transition into newly opened positions in the company that they find interesting or get places in completely new positions based on their specializations.



Salary structure in an agency

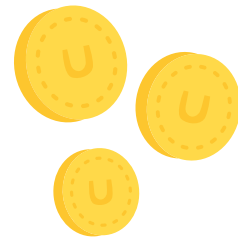
Perks and benefits that save employees money in the long run are always a valuable addition to a paycheck. Addition being the keyword here.

Because no amount of pizza parties can supplement the 10% increase in salary that people could get at the other agency across the street. **Except, that's not the case, the [statistics surrounding this](#), point in the exact opposite direction:**



- 32% of people polled in the US would take a 10% pay cut to work at a company where they like the culture
- 58% of workers will stay at a lower-paying job if it means having a great boss
- And 60% of workers would even take half of the potential paycheck if it meant working at a job they love

So if culture makes up for the differences in salary between your agency and the agency next door, **how do you structure the salaries in your company to both attract and retain top talent?**



- **Don't buy stars, build them** - Have a partnership with the local media and technical schools that provides internships and part-time positions for promising students. If you follow our onboarding tips and you build a functional onboarding program, after a couple of weeks, your time investment in onboarding them should already be paying you back. And in a few months? You might just have your hands on your newest superstar.
- Have a clear progression path - be upfront and transparent with the salary structure. It will eventually become the biggest motivator for the employees in the lower tiers. If you split your progression path into layers where everyone gets paid the same, you can skip long management discussions like: "Is a Senior Backend Developer with 4 years of experience worth the same as a Senior Art Director with 5?" An example of how to structure your progression path could be:
 1. **Intern** > unpaid, but gaining real-life skills and experience from an agency by working on real projects
 2. **Trainee** > paid, part-time or full time; self-taught, certified or freshly graduated
 3. **Apprentice** > Same credentials as a trainee, but with some successful commercial projects

4. **Junior** > Proven 1-3 years of experience with commercial projects
5. **Senior** > 3+ years of experience with commercial projects and proficient with project management and delegating tasks
6. **Management** > If you're doing linear progression, this step is simple. But if you want to do non-linear progression, it's worth differentiating at management level.
 - A. Senior members with multiple specializations and experience with managing teams
 - B. Senior members with extra non-managerial responsibilities (product development, decision making, etc.)
7. **Equity tier** > Management whose investment with the company is substantial enough to warrant equity in the company

- **Promotions, raises and employees who feel undervalued** - if you adopt the aforementioned salary structure, your employees should have a clear overview of where they fall and what they need to achieve to move up to the next salary level.



But as it goes with highly ambitious people, you will always have individuals who take on more than their fair share of responsibility and then don't feel adequately compensated. The answer should be obvious. If the employee performs above the set expectations, has the data to back it up, and asks for an increase in pay, they should get one. Sadly, when working with more than one person, it will never be that easy. Ben Horowitz summed it up the best in his class on [Y combinator - how to start a startup](#).

A point he brings up is: If you give that employee a raise, will you give everyone else who is also performing well a raise as well? What about the employees who are performing just as well, but their personality prevents them from asking directly?

U **UMBRACO TIP**

Apart from being approachable overall, managers and senior agency members can adopt these two methods to focus these conversations and help employees feel more valued and heard:

1. *Monthly walk and talk: A manager and employee go for a half-hour walk outside of the office, talking about current projects, plans for future projects, the progress of the employee and any problems they might be having*



UMBACO TIP

2. *Yearly progress conversation: Performance reviews are usually seen as a negative process because of the negative associations that people usually have with them. Walk and talks remove the need for quarterly performance reviews at a scary meeting room table.*

But a walk and talk is not really the place to sign contracts and obsess over spreadsheets. So how about a yearly progress review, close to the end of the year, talking strictly about the employee's progression path and salary?

That way, both current problems can be addressed from month to month, and larger issues or achievements can be accumulated over time.

BENEFITS

If your agency adopts all the processes and tactics mentioned above, there is an excellent chance that you will retain a lot of the talent that enters your ranks. But when the inevitable crunch time sets in, or there is a drought period in getting new business, **how can you make sure that the employees stay motivated, healthy, and with their team spirit at an all-time high?**

Agencies need to think outside of the box when offering additional benefits to their workers. Instead of looking at them as employees, look at them as people. The question these additional benefits are trying to solve is: **What would make someone look forward to going to work - even when the work itself is not going well?**



Exercise

Something as simple as having a company-wide gym membership or an in-house gym can have a giant impact on your employees, in more than one way:

- Employees who exercise regularly have more energy and are less prone to being sick
- Early starters can sneak a quick workout before work
- If people need to stay at the office late, they can get a quick energy boost by having a quick workout
- Allowing people to exercise on company time shows that the agency cares about more than just their work
- For certain people, friendships and bonds can be created much easier at a gym than in an office environment

Exercise and working out are quite broad terms. Implementing a proper exercise routine for people with no previous experience of going to the gym might also be a long term process. Here are some examples from Umbraco HQ to provide some inspiration:

1. **Weekly team sport** - Book a field once a week for an hour during work hours. It can be a floorball hall every Wednesday morning or a soccer field every Monday afternoon to start the week fresh.
2. **Plank/Wall sit** - Every day at 2 PM, everyone in the office stands up from their desk, closes their laptop, and gathers in the hall. For the next two minutes, we try to hold a plank (the exercise, not the meme from 2011). After the plank is done, everyone finds the nearest wall, and we proceed to try and hold a 3-minute wall sit as well. (Which can eventually turn into a fantastic album cover if you have a creative enough marketing department)



3. **Sweat meeting** - Every Tuesday morning, instead of sitting in a boardroom for 3 hours, our management goes to the gym together under the oversight of a personal coach. They then proceed to work out and discuss pressing issues and plans until lunch. Many great strategies and ideas were born during these meetings, no slides, no presentations, or graphs necessary.
4. **Company discounts on fitness membership** - to help motivate employees to work out (if they want to), everyone can get a discount at a local fitness center, as long as they work at Umbraco.

Events

Team Building events are now a staple of corporate lingo. But they don't have to be centered around coming up with new ideas or strategies. If you are somewhere having fun with your colleagues, no matter the environment, you will eventually bring up work. A friendship formed on a paintball field will also lead to a closer relationship at work.

A random bowling alley conversation at 3 AM could be the source of some outstanding process ideas. These are all just as possible as a couple of napkin sketches at a lunch meeting, [making a billion dollars at the box office](#). Here are some of the events we do at Umbraco HQ, which might inspire you:



1. Team night out. Have one night out with your team every month: Rotate the planning responsibility from person to person and pick:
 - One nice restaurant or bar
 - A fun activity that everyone can participate in like bowling, escape rooms, board games or paintball
 - (The company pays)
2. Company fabulous Friday. Same idea as 1. but on a company scale. On the first Friday of every month, one team prepares a program for all the other teams on a Friday afternoon with a chosen theme. They have a set budget, but other than that, they can go crazy. (Last time the Umbraco marketing department did it, we turned the lunchroom into an Italian restaurant for the night).
3. Friday bar. It might be a cliché, but ending the week by having a drink (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) with colleagues is a great way to unwind, relax and talk about the work week. Or talk about anything but work.
4. Company retreat. Have a company retreat once or twice a year to some remote location, preferably with no internet (sounds terrifying, we know, but it provides a nice reset for the mind)

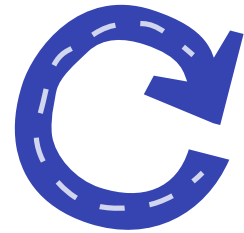


Quality of life

Quality of life, aka the art of removing anything that could cause stress to your employees from the workplace. Once again, think of an agency employee as a "user of your workspace" instead of an employee.

And if you want them to achieve their user goals of:

1. Producing quality work
2. Staying focused
3. Enjoying coming to work



What do you need to do? And how do you gather information about what you need to do?

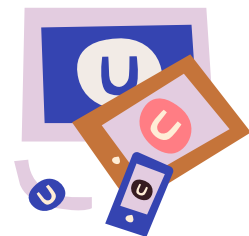
There are a lot of ways to gather information from employees. The monthly walk and talk, employee satisfaction surveys, or listening in on watercooler conversations. Whichever way you choose to collect your information, try to solve the issues to the best of your ability. No matter how small or large the complaints, if this constant improvement becomes a habit for your agency, all of your employees will start performing at their absolute maximum potential eventually.

Here are a few common problems and some ways to solve them:

- The employee is constantly late to work -> adopt flexible work hours, some people are more productive at night and prefer to sleep in
- The employee is often sick -> company exercise routine, healthy snacks available, options to work from home
- The employee is often absent because of family -> make working from home a possibility. If their work is the same quality, they can take care of their kids as well
- The employee feels undervalued even with a good salary -> try both tangible (bus cards, gym memberships, conference tickets) and intangible rewards (praise, recommendations for promotion, non-linear progression)

Work-life balance:

Sadly, the agency world is probably not the place that people go looking for great work-life balance. Especially when talking about people devoted enough to their craft to be considered top talent.



Creative people, especially, take their work home with them even when they don't want to, pondering over the newest advertising slogans and updated logos while driving home or cooking dinner. This does not mean, however, that agencies should not strive to provide a balance between top performance at the workplace and relaxed personal life for their employees.

Firstly, it is each employee's responsibility to decide what work-life balance means to them. The agency can only facilitate the decision-making process, as this decision is solely based on every individual's own ambition and at which stage of life they find themselves in.

Secondly, the agency has to address this topic in the hiring process. If the agency promises a tight schedule and overtime, the potential employee with a young family might reconsider. On the other hand, if the agency guarantees a calm, employee-first environment, they will have to restrict the number of clients they take on, as well as closely watch the scope of each project.

If these two points align, they form the basis of planning for work-life balance. But while putting the employee first, how does a company ensure that the employees are not misusing this trust, slacking off on company time when working from home, or using that time for personal projects?



There have to be specific metrics in place that monitor productivity when it comes to deliverables for each project and person. If all those are fulfilled, then it shouldn't matter if the employee is painting their fence between pitch meetings.

On the other side of the spectrum, some people find it hard to focus on anything but work. There are people who view their work as their passion and the center point of their entire life. This is also where the agency should keep track on people who work 10-12 hours everyday or work during the weekend. While it is nice to be 2 weeks ahead of schedule in billable hours, there is only so long a person can endure such a mental/physical strain on their body. Eventually, people burn out, and the long term effects of burning out, by far, outweigh the short term uptick in productivity.

To help encourage a better work-life balance, there are a few things a company can do to help an employee from working when they shouldn't.

- **Encourage employees to snooze notifications.** No matter if it's emails, Slack or something else, you can always control the notification settings on your phone. By snoozing notifications outside of working hours, you minimize the need for someone to check their phone when they're not supposed to.
- **Send employees home.** Did someone just pull off a full week of 10 hour days? Give them Monday off - even if they don't ask for it. Not everyone will ask for time off - or even need it - but by giving it to them anyway, you'll ensure that they're never afraid to ask for a break if they've been working hard for a period of time.

- Emails outside office hours. We've all been there - we just thought of something we didn't want to forget, so we sent an email to a colleague even though it was 9 PM. 3 minutes later they replied; even though they weren't supposed to answer until tomorrow. To avoid this from happening, you can set up company guidelines for sending emails outside office hours. That will also make it easier for employees to not check their work email.
- Life happens; be flexible. Working 9-5 is fine, as long as nothing new happens. But life rarely stands still for your employees. Give them the flexibility to manage their own time; whether that means taking care of a sick child, going to the mechanic with their car or going to the bank. If you force them to take hours or days off to manage these things you can't be surprised if they're not willing to work any overtime.

Offer employees the chance to go remote

- The office life is not for everyone.
- The country where you found your dream job in your dream company might not be where you want to settle down.
- Your family lives on the other side of the state, and you only see them on weekends.
- There is a pandemic outside, and just breathing the air in the bus on the morning commute is dangerous.

These are all valid arguments. But not for quitting a job. Not in 2020. These are arguments for remote work. And as repeated numerous times above: **adopting an outcome-driven system**, rather than making people sit at a desk for 9 hours, **can be a game-changer for the entire company.** Offer the employees a chance to go remote and conduct your own experiment.



Is it time to go fully remote?

Globally distributed companies and remote agencies are on the rise. One [workplace analytics report](#) shows that there has been a 159% increase in working remote work from 2005 until 2019. And remote agencies, while outnumbered by regular "sit at an office" agencies, are still experiencing growth at a much faster rate. At the same time, traditional agencies are constantly receiving demands about working from home and flexible working hours. So the question presents itself time and time again.

If remote work is so efficient, is it time to go fully remote? Will employees be more productive? Will the quality of work improve?

The pros and cons of remote work.

A few pros of remote work:

- Your potential to hire top talent just increased from:
 - A. living in the same state or city
 - B. willing to move
 - C. not employable because of distanceto: the whole world
- The price of having an office space and the costs related to upkeep, equipment, and furnishing are now zero
- Your employees can adjust their working hours for maximum productivity
- Work can get done 24/7. While a team in one time zone is sleeping, a team in a different time zone is working and vice versa
- Employees that feel lonely working from home can join a coworking space or work from a coffee shop at their leisure
- You can support your customers 24/7 without the need for early morning or late evening shifts
- Employees can skip the long commute to work, improving work-life balance
- Breaks and lunches can be taken as needed or preferred
- Employers only have to pay for time spent on tasks instead of time spent at the office

A few cons of remote work:

- Progress tracking can only be done through software
- Collaboration and guidance might prove difficult virtually
- Communication can be delayed
- Time zone differences can halt progress
- Some people prefer - and work better - in the office vibe and when they are around other people
- Some tools, no matter how advanced, cannot make up for in-person interactions, especially when brainstorming or giving feedback
- The advantages of body language and non-verbal communication get lost
- When setting up video conferences or calls the dreaded "Can you hear me?" phase, is sometimes unskippable
- Clients might get the impression that the work is outsourced and loses quality

While there are many points to consider on both sides of the argument, the world seems to be moving towards remote work slowly, but surely. But regular, office-owning agencies are still the norm and won't disappear anytime soon. But the remote work conversation might not even come up in some agencies at all.

So how about something more relatable instead: **What comes first; the client or the employee?**

Who comes first?

The client or the employee?

A lot of senior agency employees have vivid memories of playing rock paper scissors over who takes the dreaded "support phone" home for the weekend.



It's not that they are unwilling to help solve technical issues from time to time. The problems arise because clients and management love to adopt the "the customer is always right" approach, which is, more often than not, a quite unpleasant experience for the person on the other end.

If you asked a random manager in any agency if they put their employees or their clients first, they would, without a doubt, say it's the employees.

"The employees are the lifeblood of our business, we would be nothing without our employees, their happiness is our number one priority!"

- The LinkedIn of every manager ever... while things are going well

After that, the next question should be:

"When was the last time you called a client and told them that they would have the assets on Monday instead of Friday because you want Frank to go home and spend time with his kids?"

Frank could have had an unproductive week. He might have taken too many toilet breaks. Or maybe his deadline got pushed because of a lack of planning on the management side. The reason for the delay does not matter.

If the client needs those assets on a Friday, in most agencies, Frank is staying overtime until the job is done. But the reason should matter. If it's not Frank's fault, then he should not have to stay. If the deadline was moved by the client or the scope has been extended without accounting for the time constraints... the client will have to wait.



"To make customers happy, we have to make sure our employees are happy first."

- Zappos

The answer to "client or the employee?" is usually based on company values. But the best way to prevent employees from leaving and the company going out of business at the same time is once again, **moderation**.

If you always choose your employees side, even when they might be in the wrong, they will never improve, and your agency will eventually lose all clients. No clients, no revenue. No revenue, no employees.

But if you never stand behind your employees, even when you know the client demands too much or is just plain illogical, your employees will eventually leave.

The golden middle ground is making sure that you deliver the best customer service possible by putting your employees first. If everyone feels engaged, taken care of, and sufficiently trained, there will be fewer arguments with the clients.

When a dispute does happen:

1. Always assume positive intent from both parties
2. Trust the employee's judgment
3. Moving an employee to a different team/account/client is preferable to firing them
4. If a client does not seem to work well with any employee in the agency, it might be time to fire the client instead

In closing

There are not enough developers in the world to fulfill the demand. And if you want to go for the best of the best... there are a lot of things to consider and act out every day. And if nothing else, we hope this ebook gave you some good ideas on where to start.

Need a new CMS in your life?

Apart from being the friendliest CMS on the planet, Umbraco is a best-of-breed open source .NET content management system, which gives you full flexibility and lets you do things your way. If you're curious to see why over 500,000 websites worldwide have chosen Umbraco, you can read more at: umbraco.com/why-choose-umbraco/.

Umbraco is also a tightly-knit community of more than 221,000 developers, backed up by a core HQ team in the heart of Denmark with some world-class company culture... if you want to know more about us, and our community, the best place to start is [Umbraco.com](https://umbraco.com).