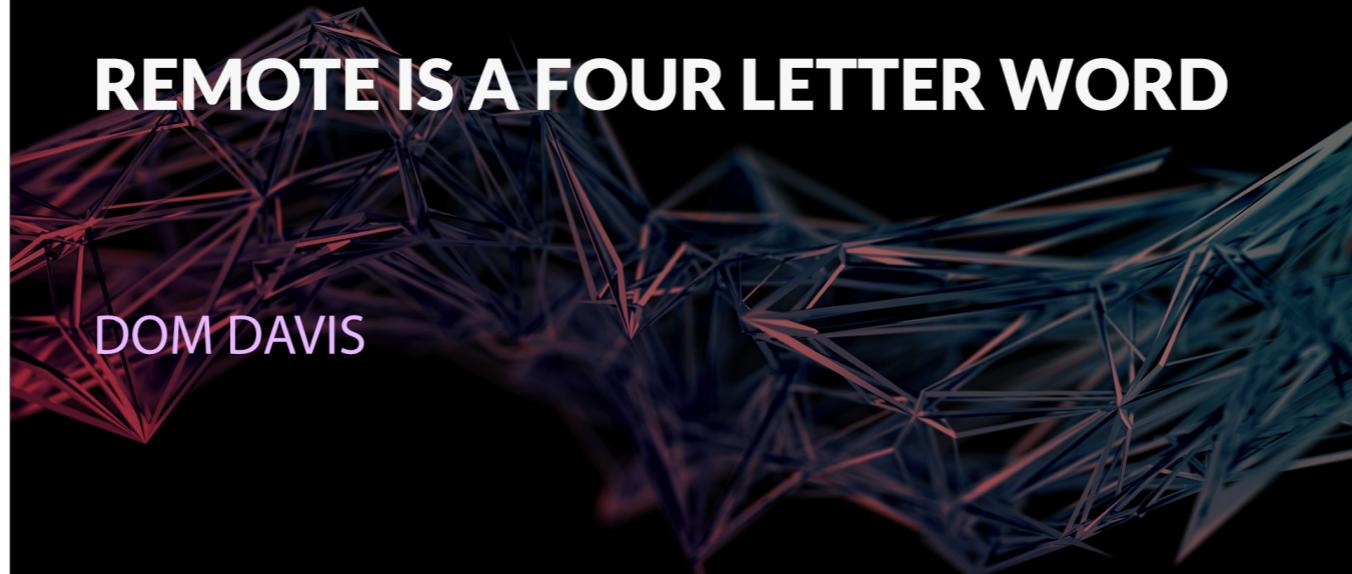


accu  
2022

# REMOTE IS A FOUR LETTER WORD

DOM DAVIS



accu  
2022

# REMOTE IS A FOUR LETTER WORD

DOM DAVIS

Remote is a four letter word.



**REMOTE**

1 2 3 4 5 6

OK, so it's a 6 letter word

# PEDANT

1 2 3 4 5 6

but then, so is Pedant.

# EXPLETIVE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

What I mean when I say "four letter word" is that it's an expletive



\$\*%&

like... um...



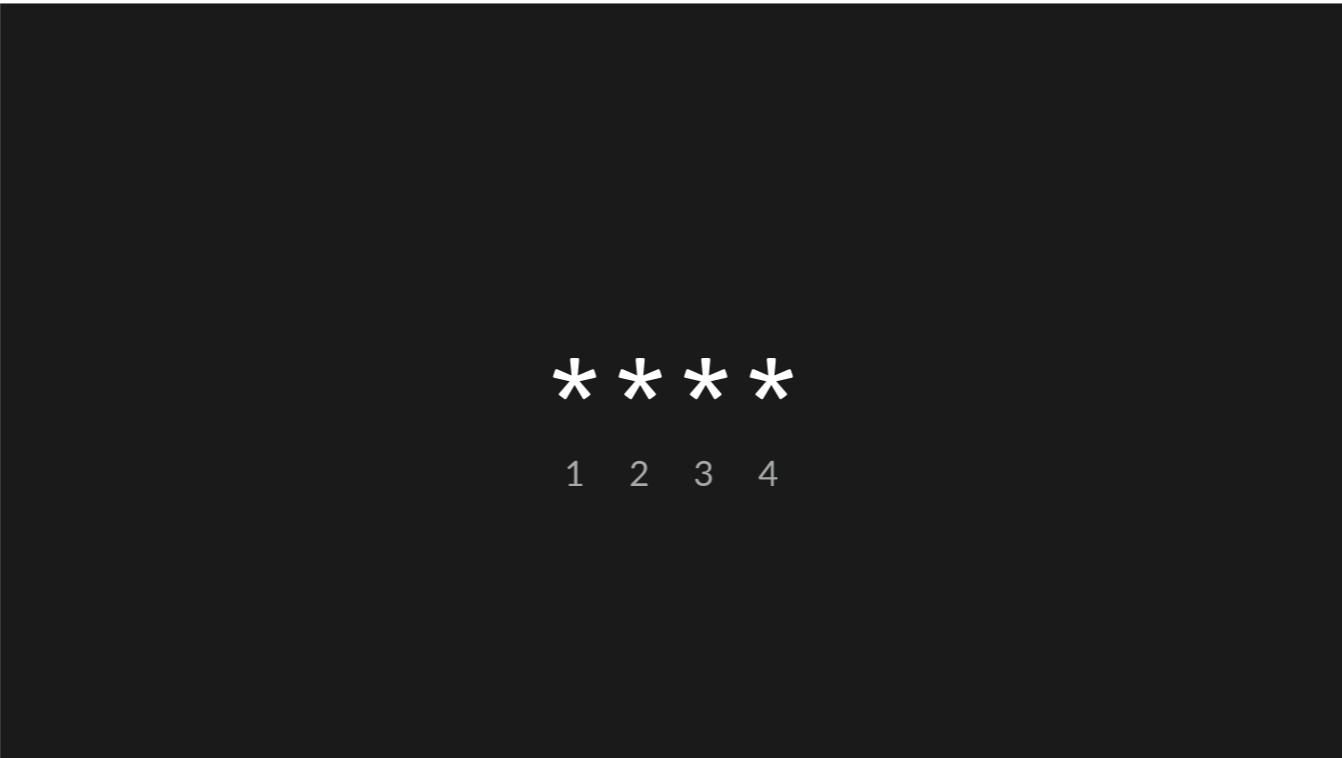
%\$\*&

and ahh....



\$%\*&

or if you're being really rude and wanting to shock... I know, right. Less than a minute in and we've already dropped that one into the mix.



\* \* \* \*

1 2 3 4

Typically, in British English, expletives are four letters long; thus "four letter word" is a euphemism for a rude word.



DOM DAVIS

1 2 3      1 2 3 4 5

My name is Dom Davis, that's three and five letters respectively, although my full name is 24 letters long, requiring 27 bytes to store in UTF-8.

# DOM DAVIS

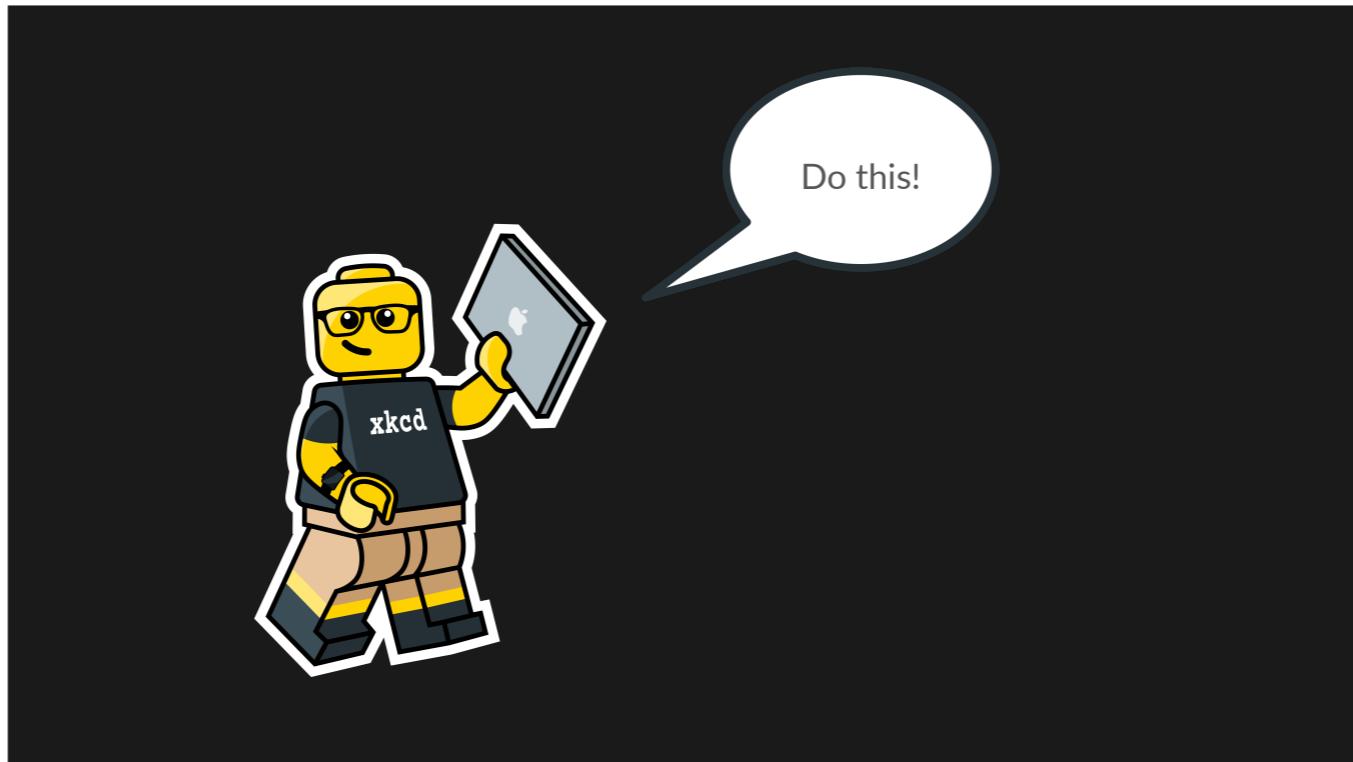
1 2 3      1 2 3 4 5

Not that it's relevant, it's just I've kicked off with this whole letter count thing and it's hard to jump off that particular track.

# CONSULTANT

1 2 3 . . . . 4

I am a software consultant, another four letter word for many people, who has his fingers in many pies.



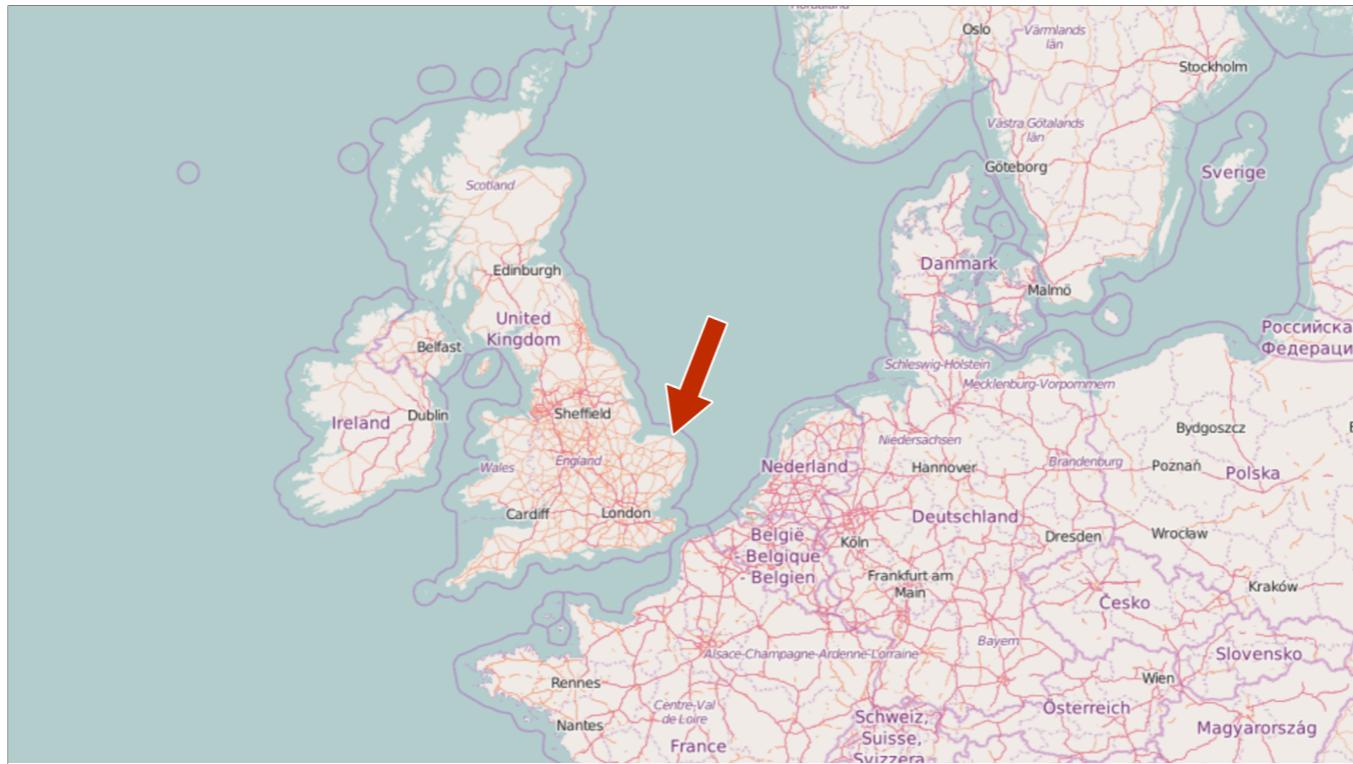
Sometimes I do CTO type things which seems to involve listening to the problems a company is facing and going "do this"... while not actually having to worry about how "this" is going to get done.



Occasionally I train people in Golang.



But mostly I write code, generally in Golang, so a mixed bag of things.



My job allows me to work from... well, anywhere really. But I choose to work from home. Prior to the pandemic I chose to work from an office, but not for the reasons you might think.



This isn't the first period of my life where I've worked from home either.



Hopefully I have concluded the part of my life that involves traditional offices because I am one of those who have thrived during this whole pandemic thing. I believe the technical term for people like me is "weirdo", but I am not an expert, so don't quote me on that.

# I AM NOT AN EXPERT

And while we're on the subject, I am not an expert. I am a Neo4j Certified Developer with some A-Levels and a good collection of GCSE's. The only BSC I have is my Bronze Swimming Certificate. I have the gold and silver too.

# I AM NOT AN EXPERT

The Neo4j knowledge is useful for my talk tomorrow, but not so much this one. The academic qualifications probably aren't relevant, and swimming will not feature at all. So, in summary, not an expert.

# REMOTE

1 2 3 4 5 6

With that out of the way, let's delve into what remote means.



For me the word remote brings up one of two images. Either TV remote...



or remote island, or jungle or something. For others it may conjure other things. But these days it's also becoming a word we see in job adverts.

Experience: 5+ years C++  
Salary: £Competitive  
Location: Remote

Location: Remote

Experience: 5+ years C++23

Salary: £Competitive

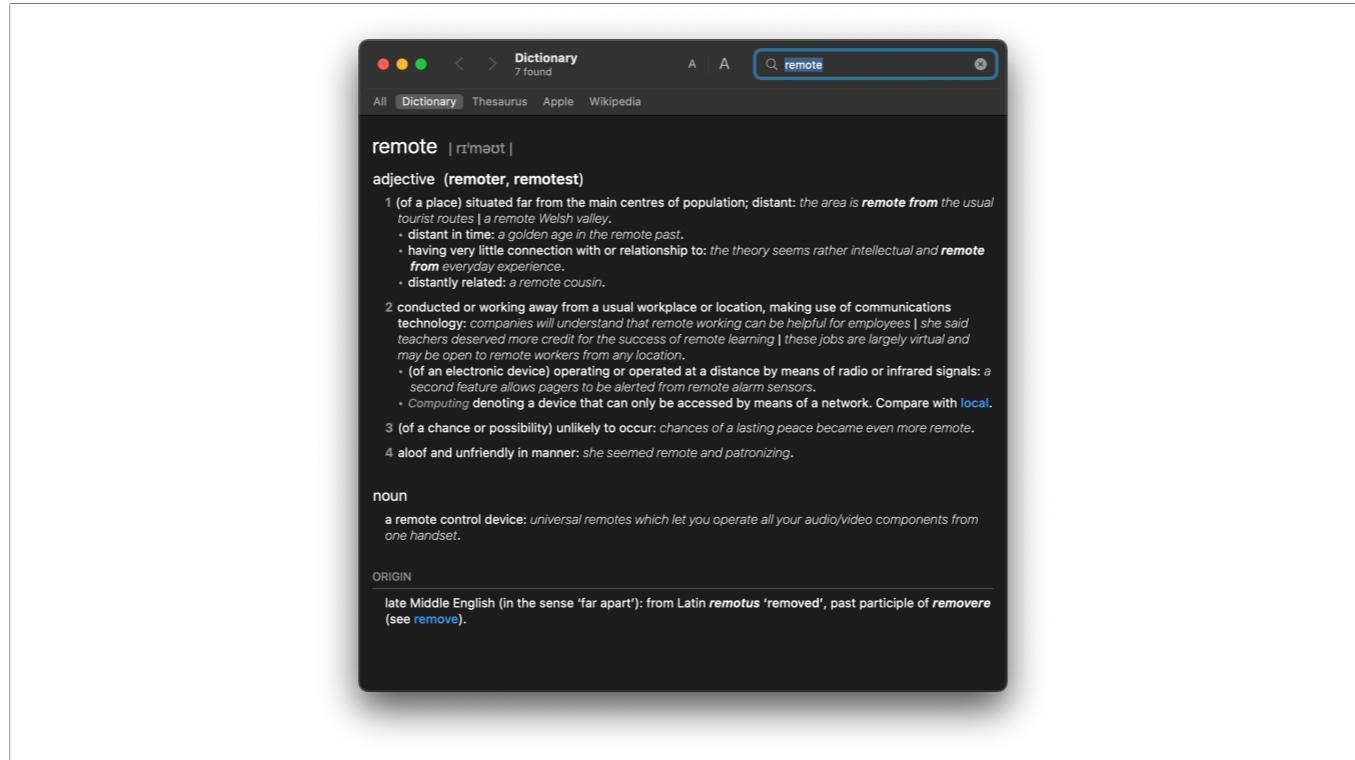
Location: Remote (minimum 5 days in the office per week, no remote work permitted on working days, must maintain all timezones)

Or, more likely: Location: Remote, with a bunch of qualifiers.

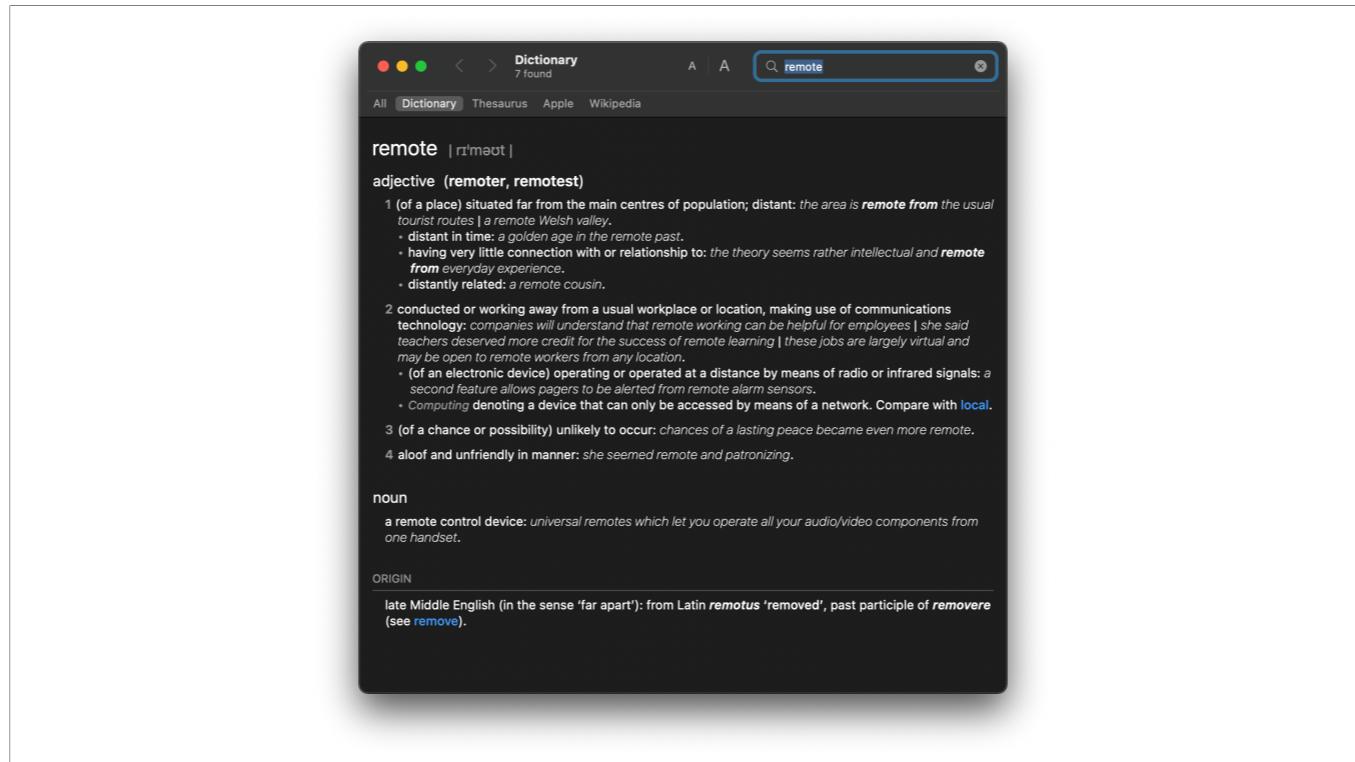
# REMOTE

1 2 3 4 5 6

So what does remote mean?



The dictionary on my Mac defines remote to be... well, quite a lot of things actually. And we discover that remote, as in remote control, is a noun whereas all other meanings are adjectives - which I should have remembered from my GCSE English (grade B).



It also tells us the origin, in the sense of "far apart", is from late Middle English, and the word came from the Latin *remotus*, or 'removed'. I did not do Latin at GCSE.

**remote** | rɪ'meʊt |

**adjective (remoter, remotest)**

1 (of a place) situated far from the main centres of population; distant: *the area is remote from the usual tourist routes | a remote Welsh valley.*

- **distant in time:** *a golden age in the remote past.*
- **having very little connection with or relationship to:** *the theory seems rather intellectual and remote from everyday experience.*
- **distantly related:** *a remote cousin.*

This origin ties into the first definition of Remote provided by the dictionary:

**remote** | rɪ'meʊt |

**adjective (remoter, remotest)**

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**remote** | rɪ'meʊt |

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- **having very little connection with or relationship to:** *the theory seems rather intellectual and remote from everyday experience.*
- **distantly related:** *a remote cousin.*

Although I'm not sure how far down my list of "places that are remote" I'd need to go before I got to "Welsh valley".

**remote** | rɪ'meʊt |

**adjective (remoter, remotest)**

1 (of a place) situated far from the main centres of population; distant: *the area is remote from the usual tourist routes | a remote Welsh valley.*

- **distant in time:** *a golden age in the remote past.*
- **having very little connection with or relationship to:** *the theory seems rather intellectual and remote from everyday experience.*
- **distantly related:** *a remote cousin.*

It also gives an example for time.

"distant in time: a golden age in the remote past."

**remote** | rɪ'meʊt |

**adjective (remoter, remotest)**

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- **having very little connection with or relationship to:** *the theory seems rather intellectual and remote from everyday experience.*
- **distantly related:** *a remote cousin.*

Notice how both definitions use the term **distant**. Distant is also used when talking about relationships:

**remote** | rɪ'meʊt |

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"distantly related: a remote cousin."

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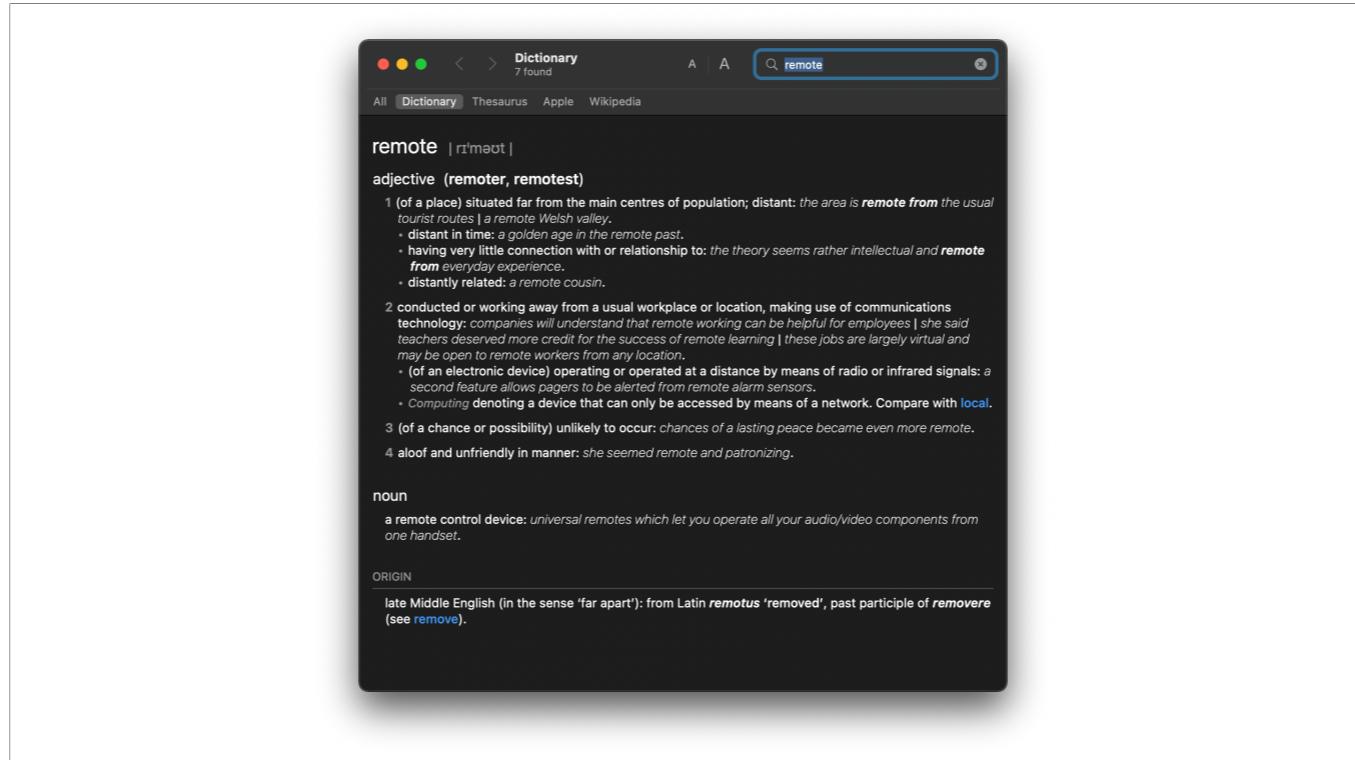
And then: "having very little connection with or relationship to: the theory seems rather intellectual and remote from everyday experience."

**3** (of a chance or possibility) unlikely to occur: *chances of a lasting peace became even more remote.*

**4** aloof and unfriendly in manner: *she seemed remote and patronizing.*

Other definitions include: "(of a chance or possibility) unlikely to occur: chances of a lasting peace became even more remote."

And: "aloof and unfriendly in manner: she seemed remote and patronising."



There is one more definition, which I would describe as the "modern" definition which I'm going to skip for now, because it's actually that definition that I take issue with.



NEGATIVE

I lobbed the older definitions into a random free sentiment analysis website and, unsurprisingly, they come out as negative - or, for the two shorter ones, neutral.



Despite a remote tropical island being, to my mind, a very positive association, the way we define the word remote is by using mostly negative terms.

**2** conducted or working away from a usual workplace or location, making use of communications technology: companies will understand that remote working can be helpful for employees | she said teachers deserved more credit for the success of remote learning | these jobs are largely virtual and may be open to remote workers from any location.

- (of an electronic device) operating or operated at a distance by means of radio or infrared signals: a second feature allows pagers to be alerted from remote alarm sensors.
- Computing denoting a device that can only be accessed by means of a network. Compare with [local](#).

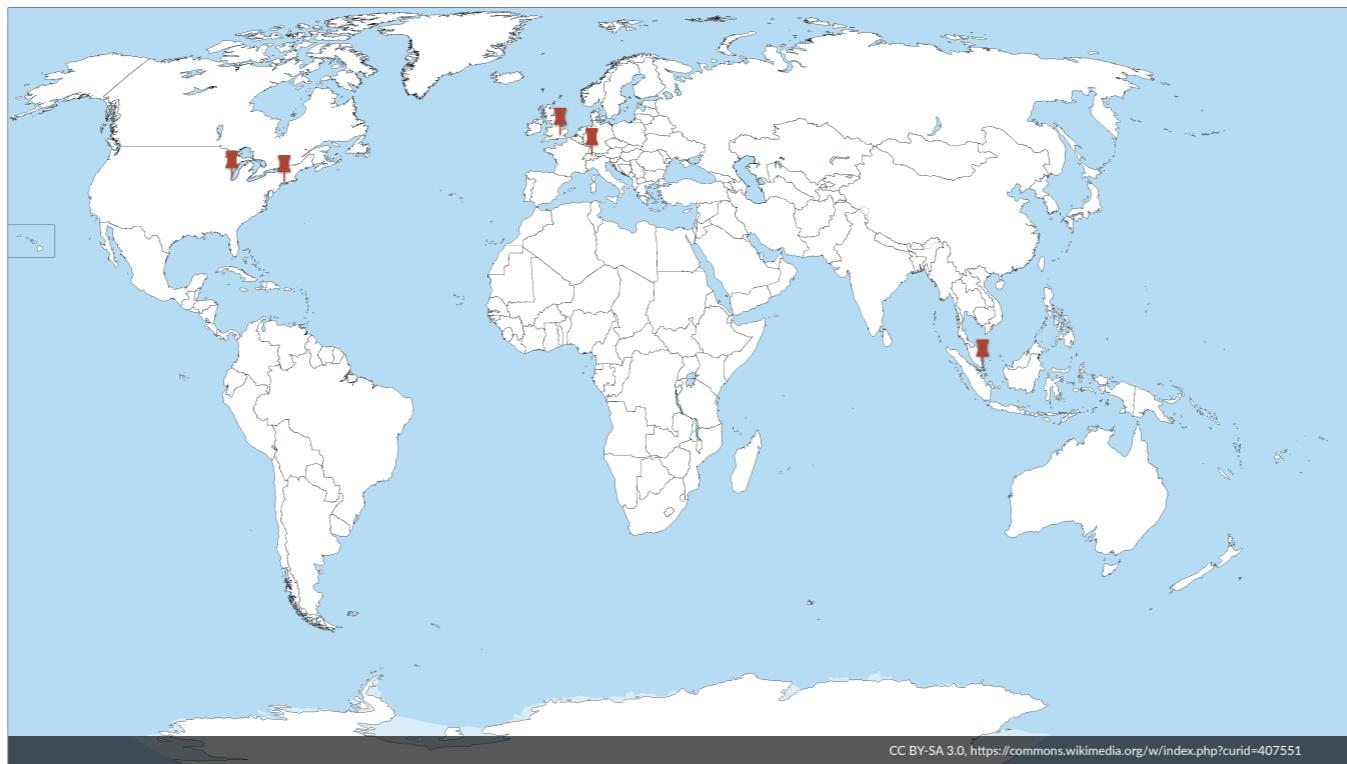
Which is a problem, because that negative association seems to have crept into the modern definition. And I don't understand why. The definition itself isn't negative.



In the late 90's I worked in a second level support team at a large investment bank. The system we looked after was a proprietary messaging platform used to move trade data between systems.



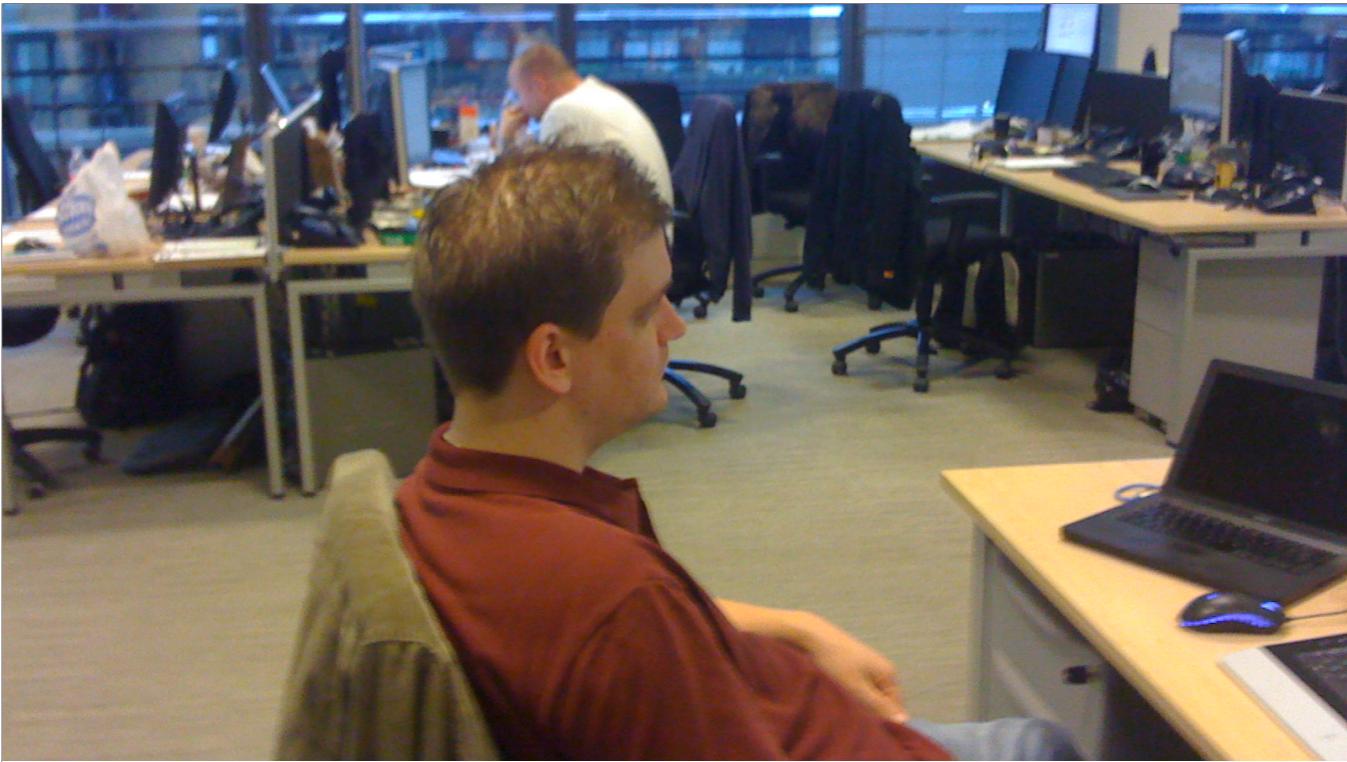
Being a global bank this meant that the support team needed to be available 24/7 and the easiest way to do this was to split the team over the various continents on which the bank had a presence. So we had people in London, Stamford Connecticut, Chicago, Singapore, and Zurich.



Of those locations, London and Zurich are the closest, but at 777km between the two they're not exactly next door.



Now I would class my job back then as your standard office job. I travelled to an office, sat at a desk in that office and had a computer and a phone provided for me to use. Not a remote position.



As a quick aside I should point out this image isn't of that office. This is from circa 2008. The only image I have of my place of work before that is



This. Tier 1 investment bank. Worlds most pathetic Christmas tree. Obviously the ones the public could see were towering beauties, immaculately shaped and decorated.



Anyway, desk job, distributed team. Note the term. I would not describe us as remote, because we interacted, constantly, and we were all in offices. Just different offices.



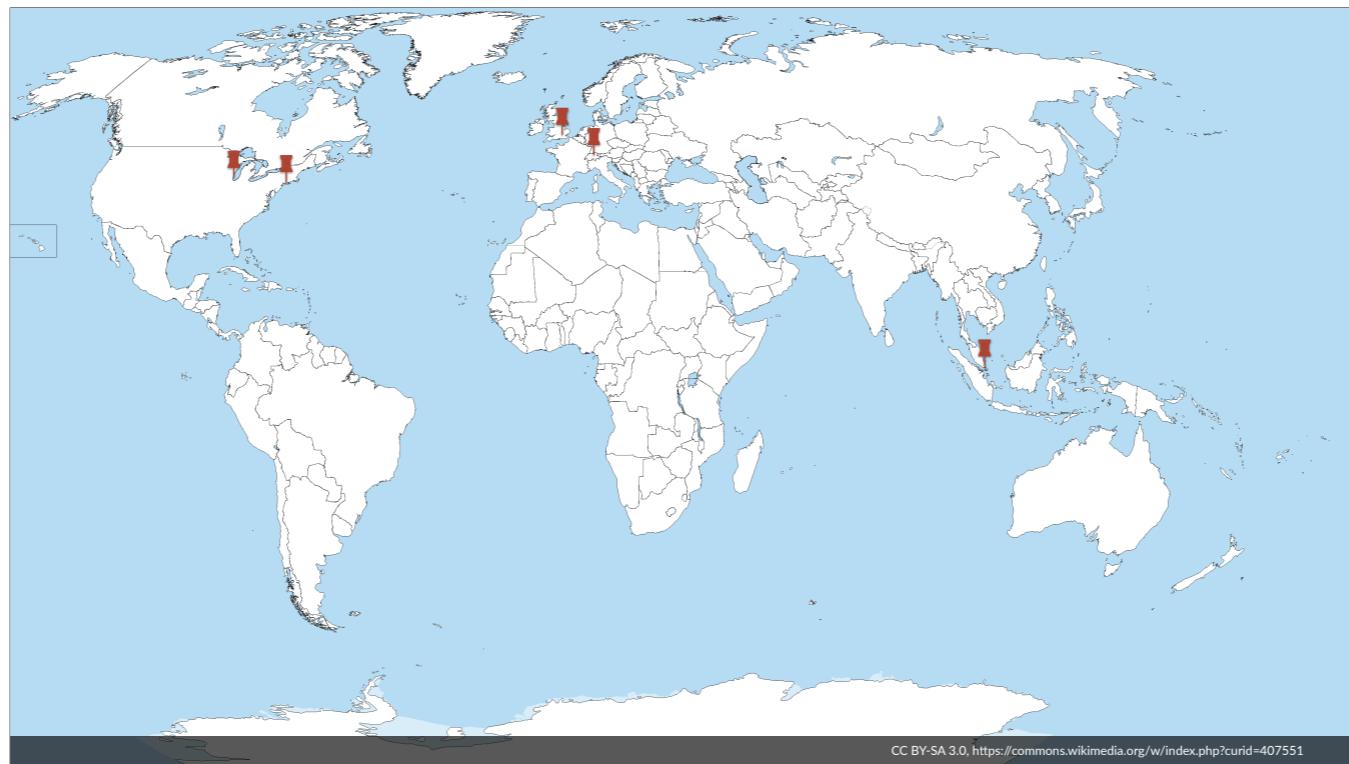
Being the late 90's video chat wasn't really a thing, but we did have an IRC based internal messaging system which we all used heavily.



And, of course, telephones were a thing if we needed to speak to people. They were clunky landline things, but they worked, and we could easily conference in people if we needed a group chat.



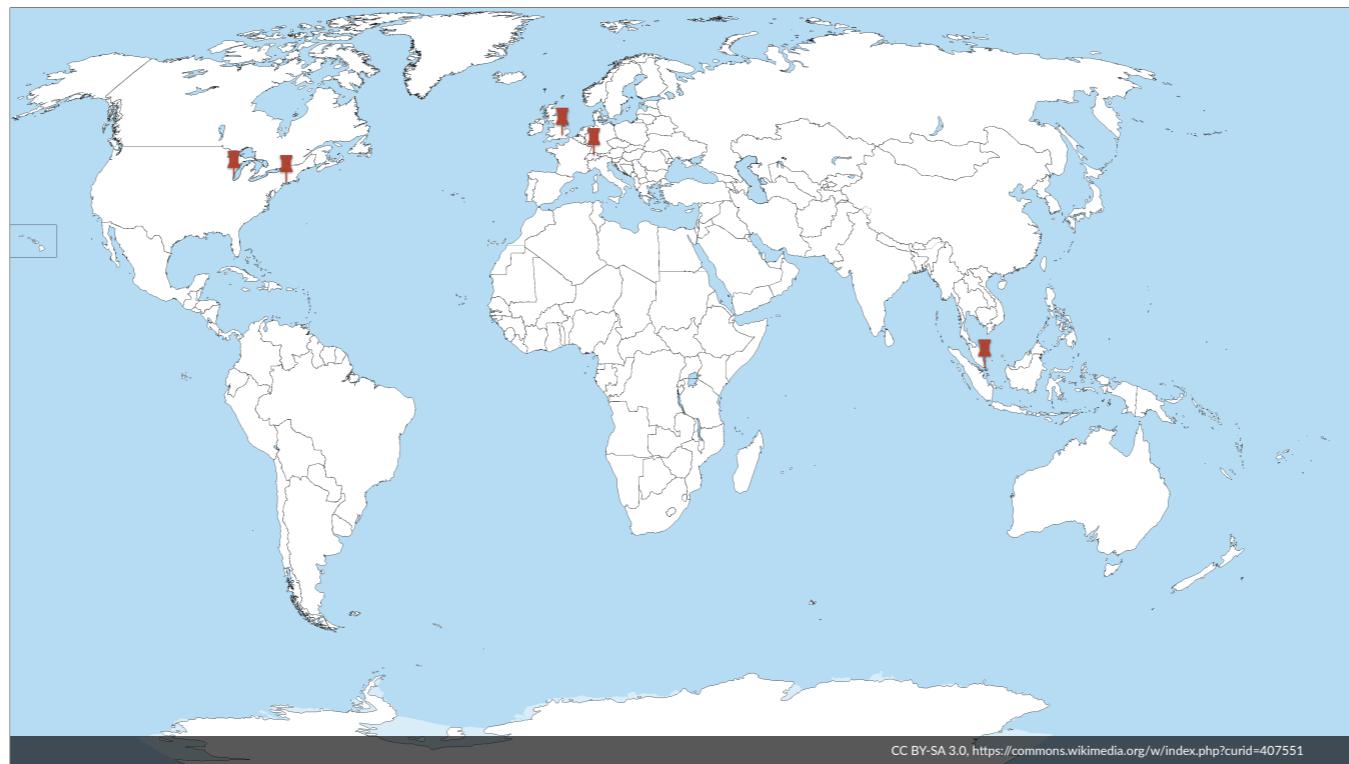
Oh, and there was also email. So much email. But that was more a function of the organisation than the team.



And it worked. Despite it being a stayed, lumbering organisation with conservative views, and very tight controls on everything, our team functioned as a cohesive whole. Mainly because we dealt with the fact that not everyone was in the same room, or even same timezone on a day to day basis.



Conversations were usually had on IRC, even if they were between colleagues in the same office, so there was a written record for others to see. Verbal conversation could be transcribed to chat, or relayed on our regular team calls so everyone was kept in sync.



Not just work stuff either, this went for all communication. The water cooler style conversations, the general team chat. The messing about. Everything that a quote unquote "in person team does", but in a different form.



Now despite our geographic distribution, there were periods over the weekend when it wasn't office hours for any of our team members. Also, while we were all highly skilled at our jobs, specific knowledge of some systems was not necessarily evenly distributed among everyone.



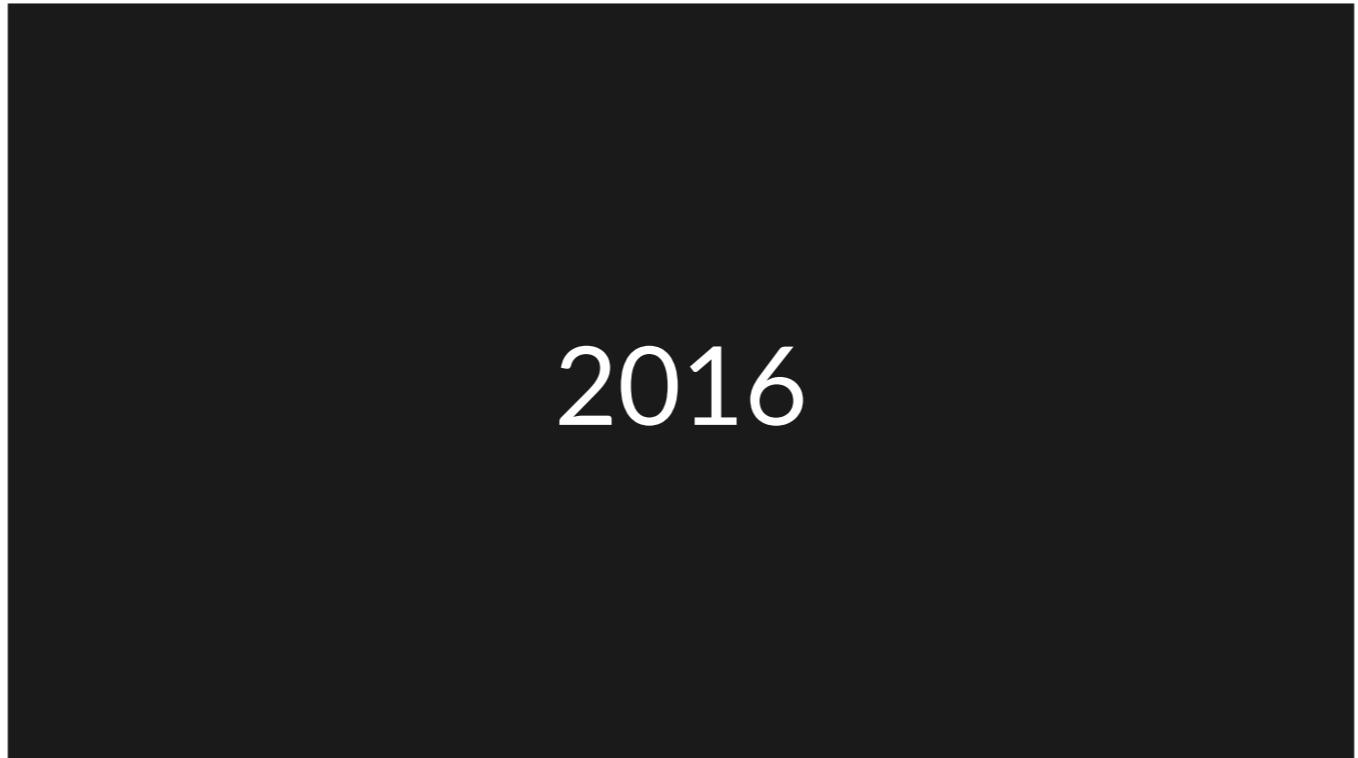
This has nothing to do with the fact the team was distributed, and everything to do with the fact that this is the reality for teams that deal with complex systems. Different people become repositories for different bits of esoterica.



So we had a rota of people who were on call. And they had a laptop, and could dial in from wherever they were - and literally dial in; when I first joined ADSL wasn't really a thing. Quite often support calls would be the middle of the night and you'd be dialling in from home.



1990's, clunky corporate, and people were working from home.



2016

Fast forward 20 years and 2016 rears its ugly head.

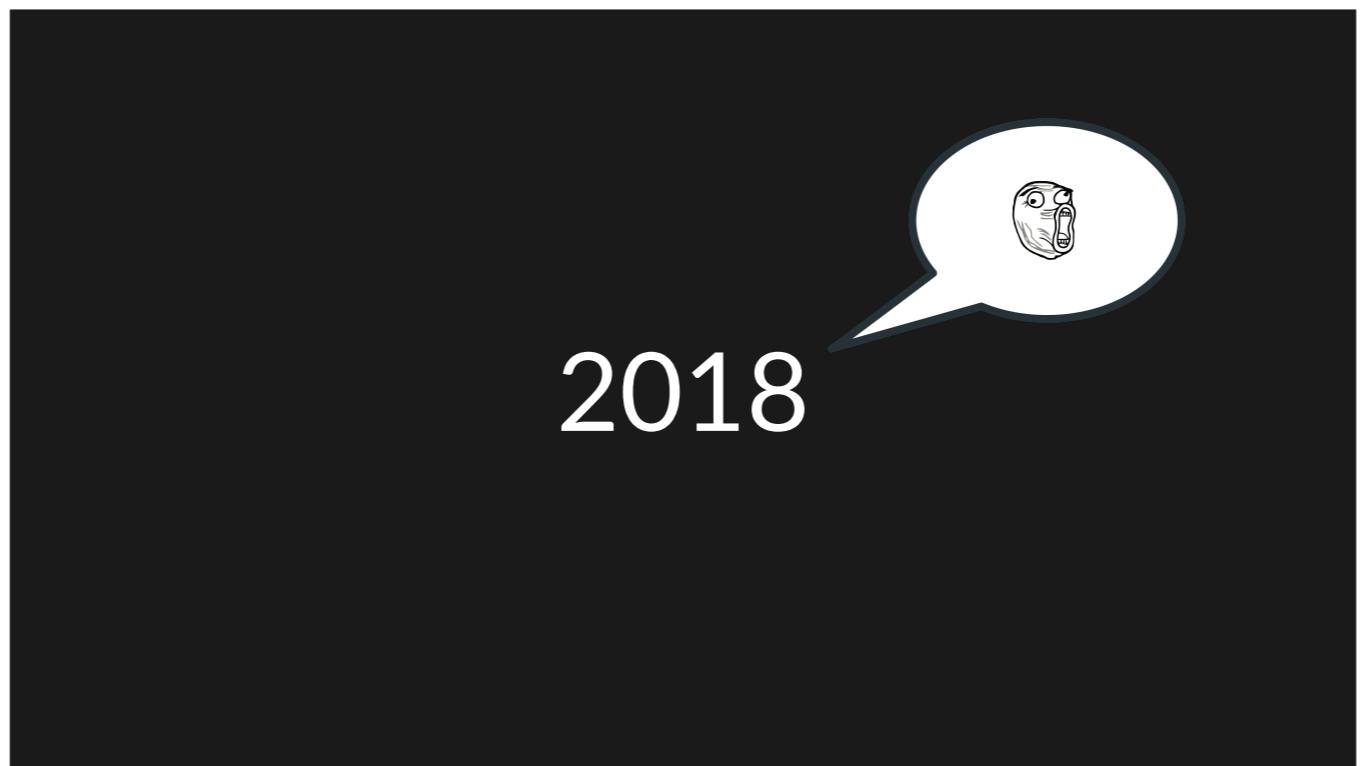


2017

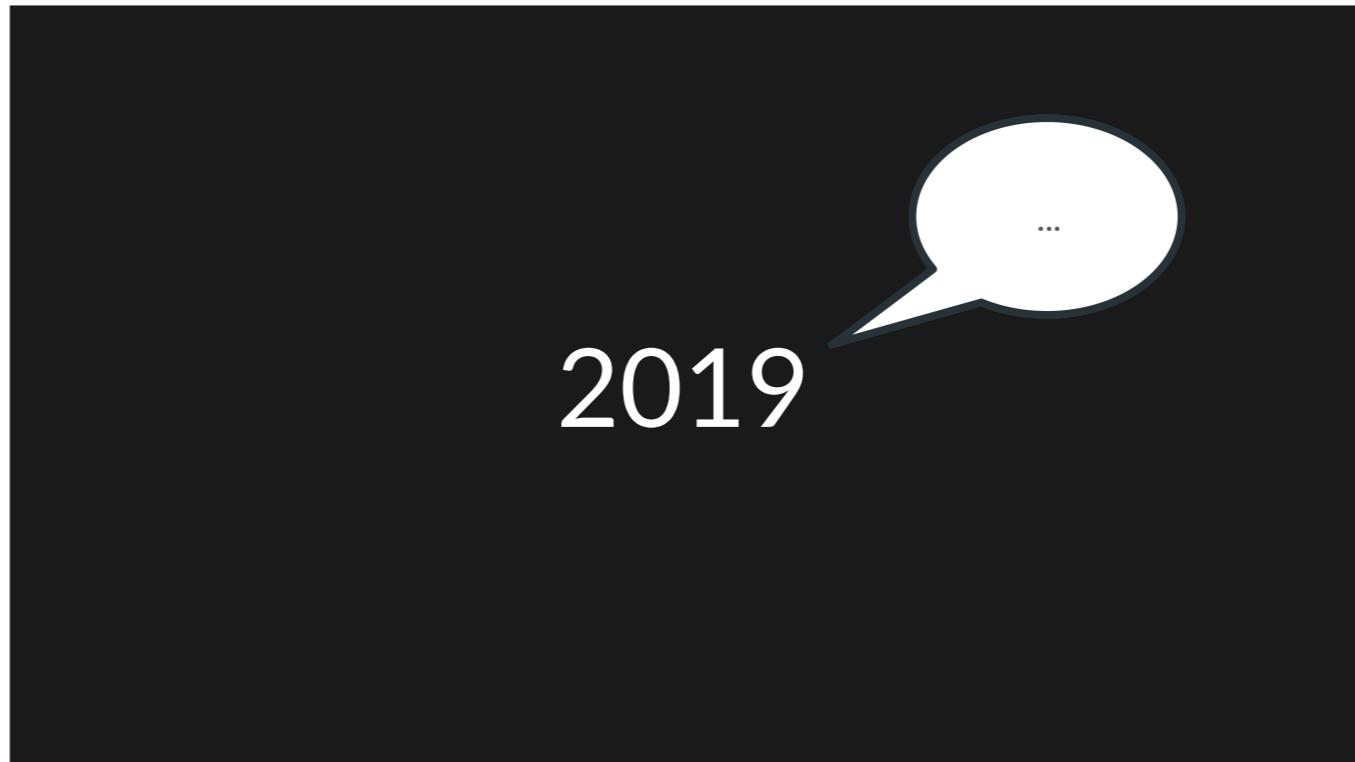
2017 looked at what 2016 did



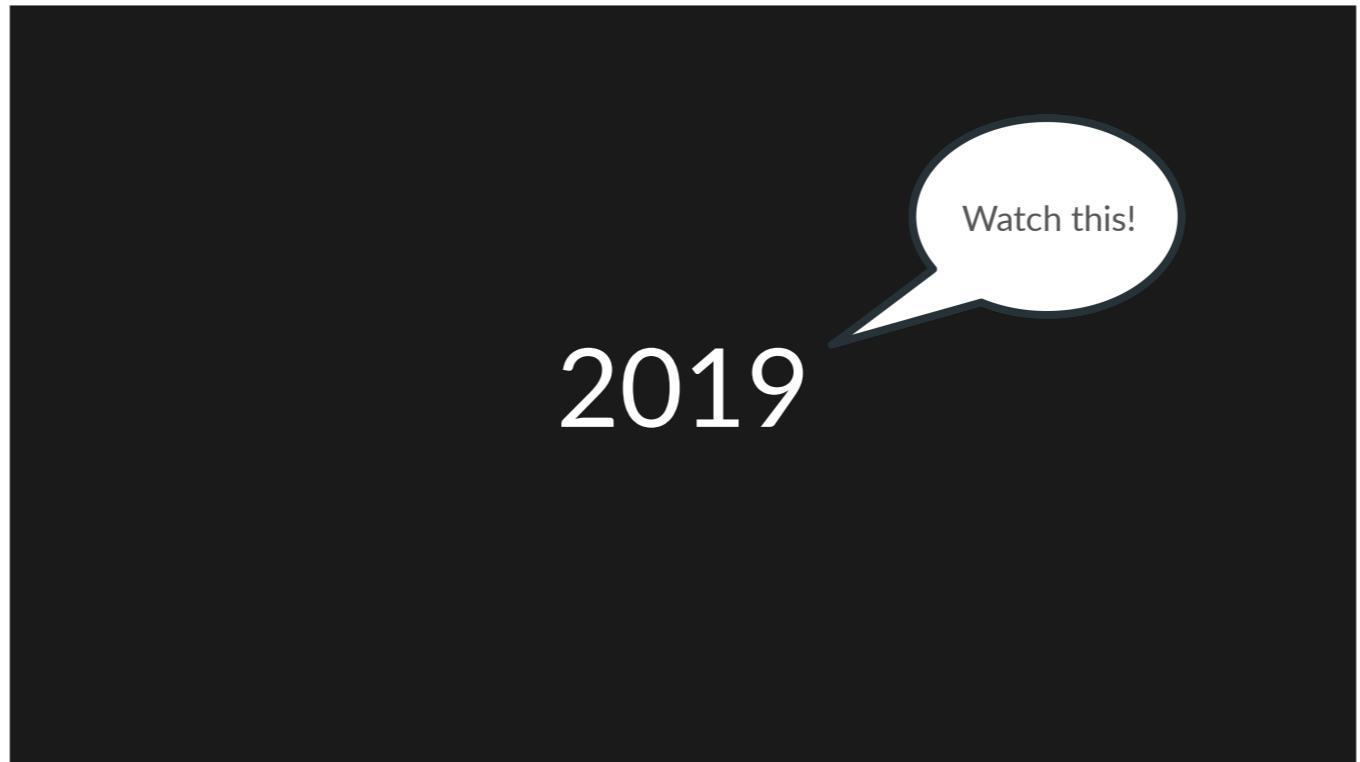
and went "hold my beer"



2018 did similar



Then 2019 looked at what had gone before, laughed, was quiet for a bit and then went



Watch this.



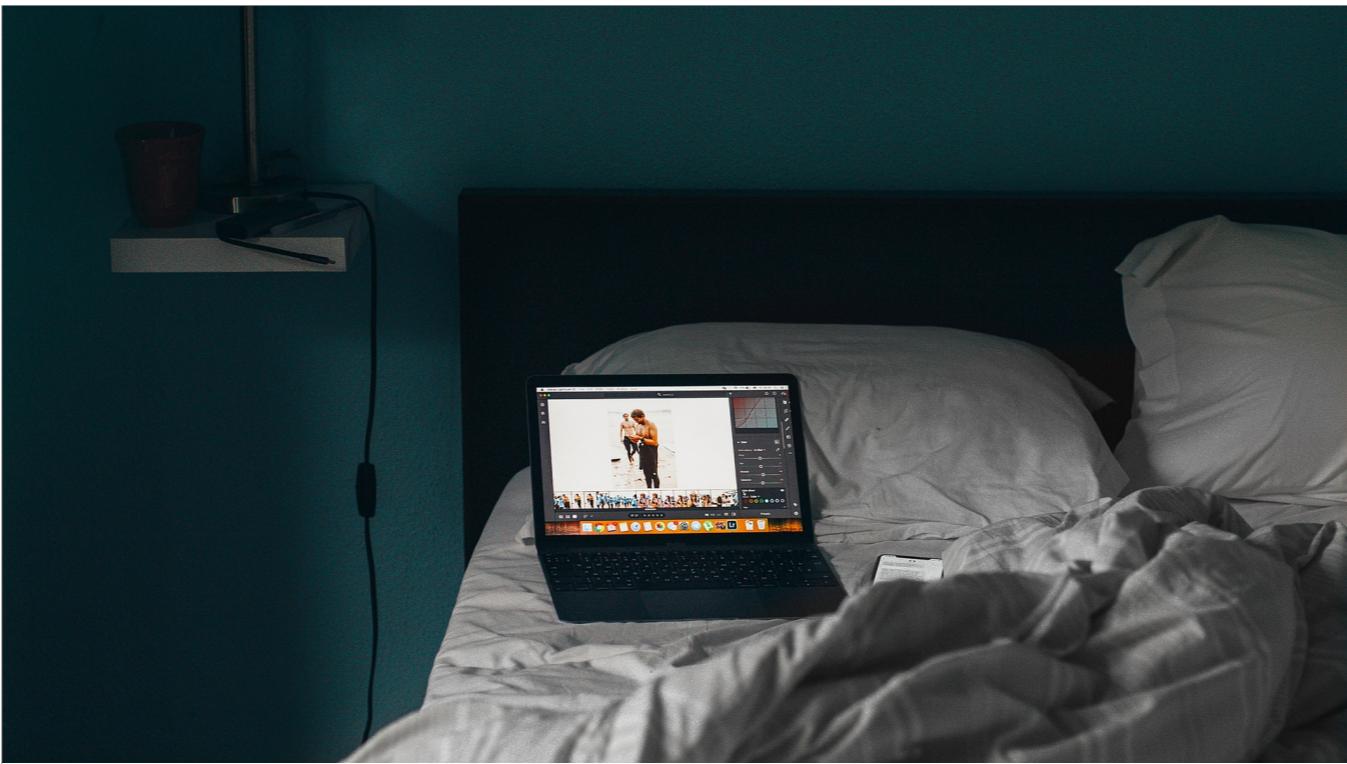
followed by 2020 which rocked up and declared that nobody gets to hold beer, or indeed anything, at least not in public.



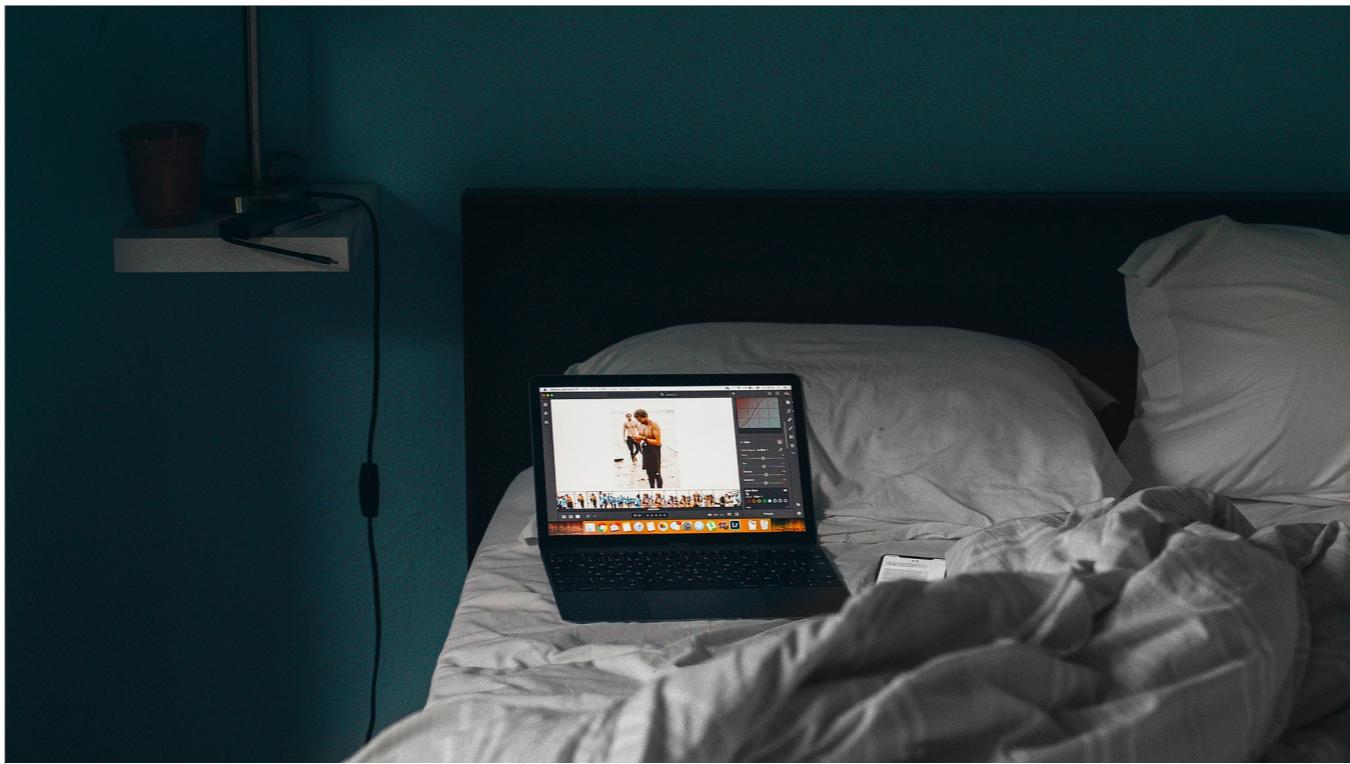
And all those organisations that required people to work in a traditional office suddenly let everyone work from home, while Trevor McDonald read the news from his front room.



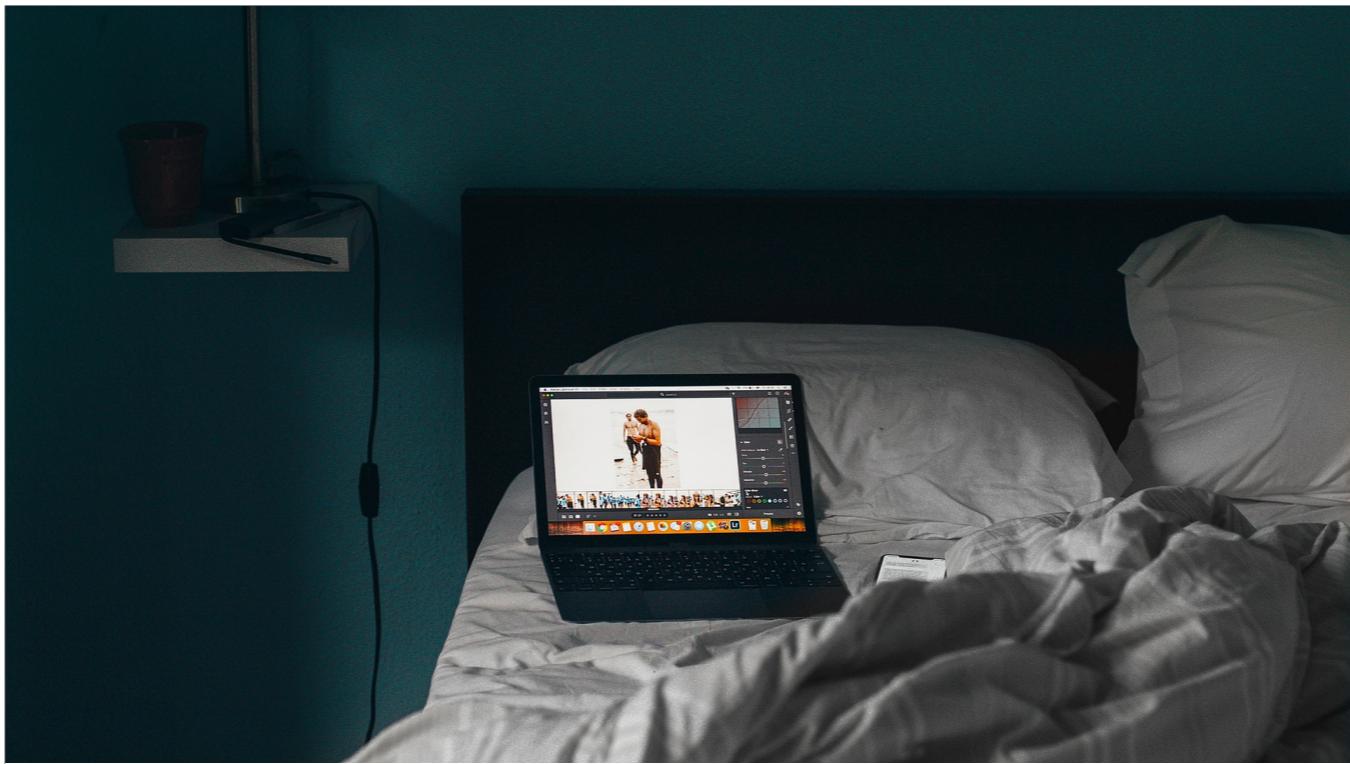
You see, the 25 or so years between my experience of a distributed team and the pandemic had caused a lot of changes in the technology that enables working...



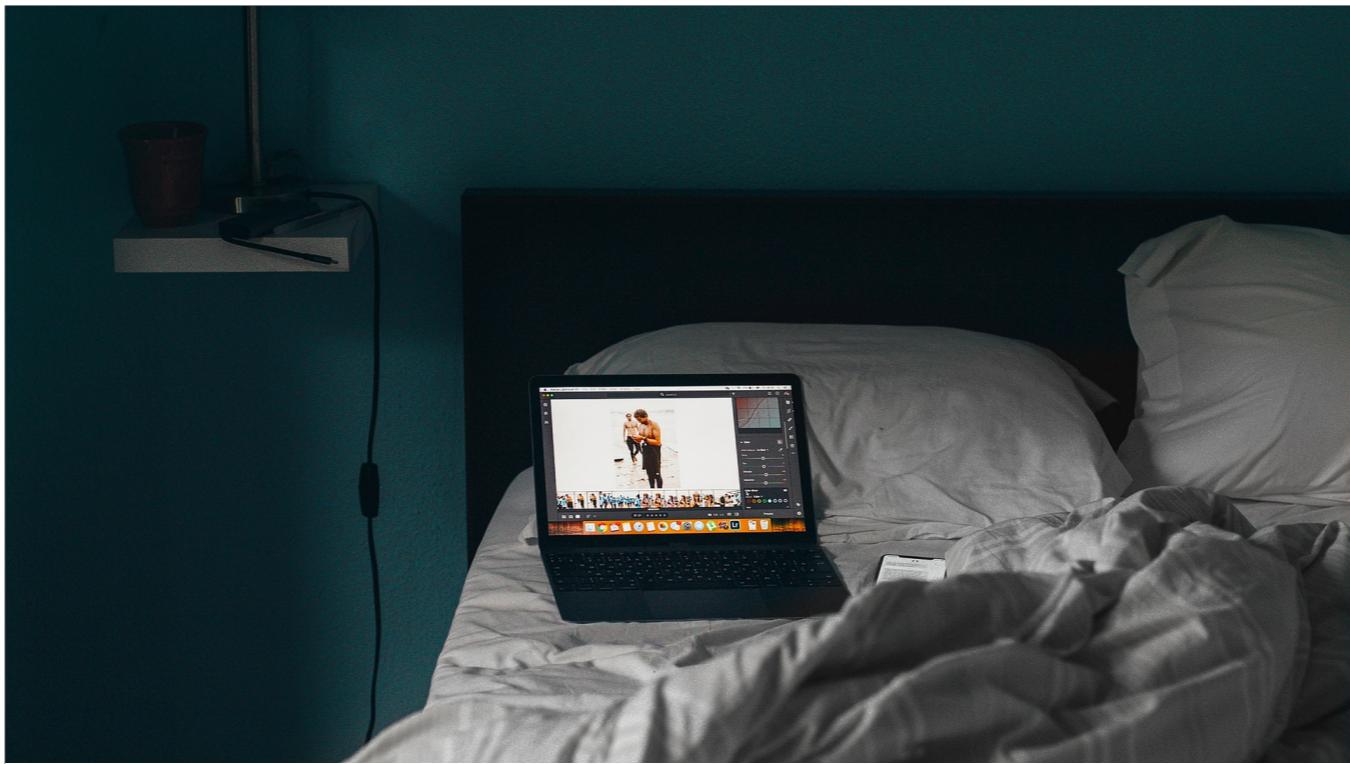
well, from anywhere really.



My mobile phone can get a data connection that's faster then the wired LAN connection I had in the office in the 90's. I have a small, lightweight laptop with huge amounts of processing power and long battery life.



Virtualisation and VPNs mean we don't necessarily need to be using work issued equipment and work networks. Instant messaging is far more ubiquitous, and video calling is quick and easy. Sadly email hasn't died a death yet.



Now, obviously I'm talking about a privileged section of society who's jobs are not actually location dependent.



A huge number of workers still needed to head into work every day because their jobs do rely on their location. Shoutout to the NHS, the workers in my local co-op, and my Amazon delivery drivers.



It turns out that most of the reticence to allow flexible working location was about trust. Corporations did not trust their employees to work effectively if they were not in the office, under their watchful eye.



[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/feature/image/78987/PM\\_presser.jpg](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/feature/image/78987/PM_presser.jpg)

And in March 2020, the governments of many countries turned round and went "tough". Suddenly the Genie was out of the bottle.



We did somewhat end up with the other extreme however. People working from home because they had to, regardless of the practicalities.



I have a fantastic home office setup. Others were not so lucky. Kitchen tables were pressed into service. People struggled to source web-cams and decent chairs to sit on. But we managed it. Because we had too.



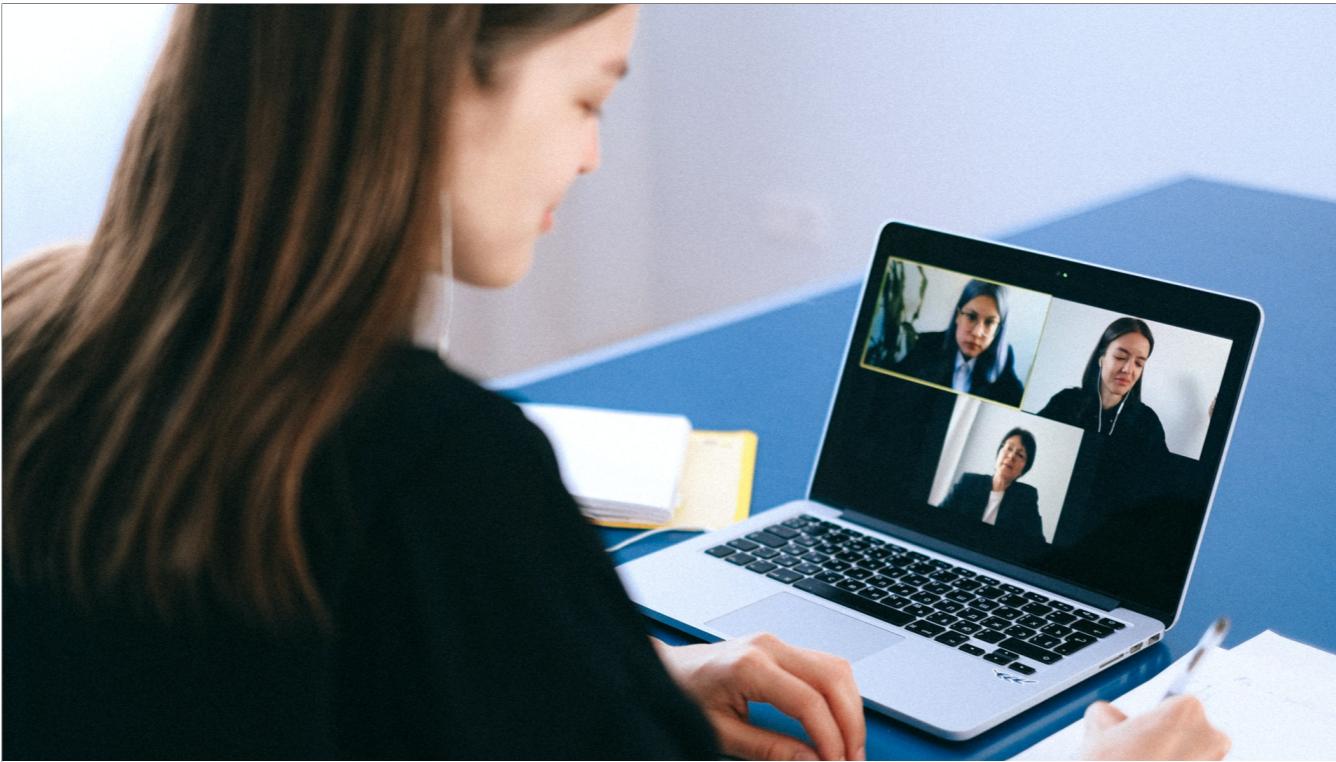
And that issue of trust? I'm going to suggest that if a person requires the threat of their boss looking over their shoulder to actually knuckle under and do work, then they're likely going to try to slack off wherever they are. I know some companies actually reported increased productivity while their workforce was out.



More importantly though, we quickly developed effective means of communication because practically nobody was colocated. The lessons that my team all those years ago had learned from being geographically dispersed were now learned by many.



Zoom caught Skype asleep at the wheel and dominated the video conferencing market. Slack and Discord saw massive increases in their usage. And, as ever, email also stepped into the breach. Not that we needed, or wanted it to do so.



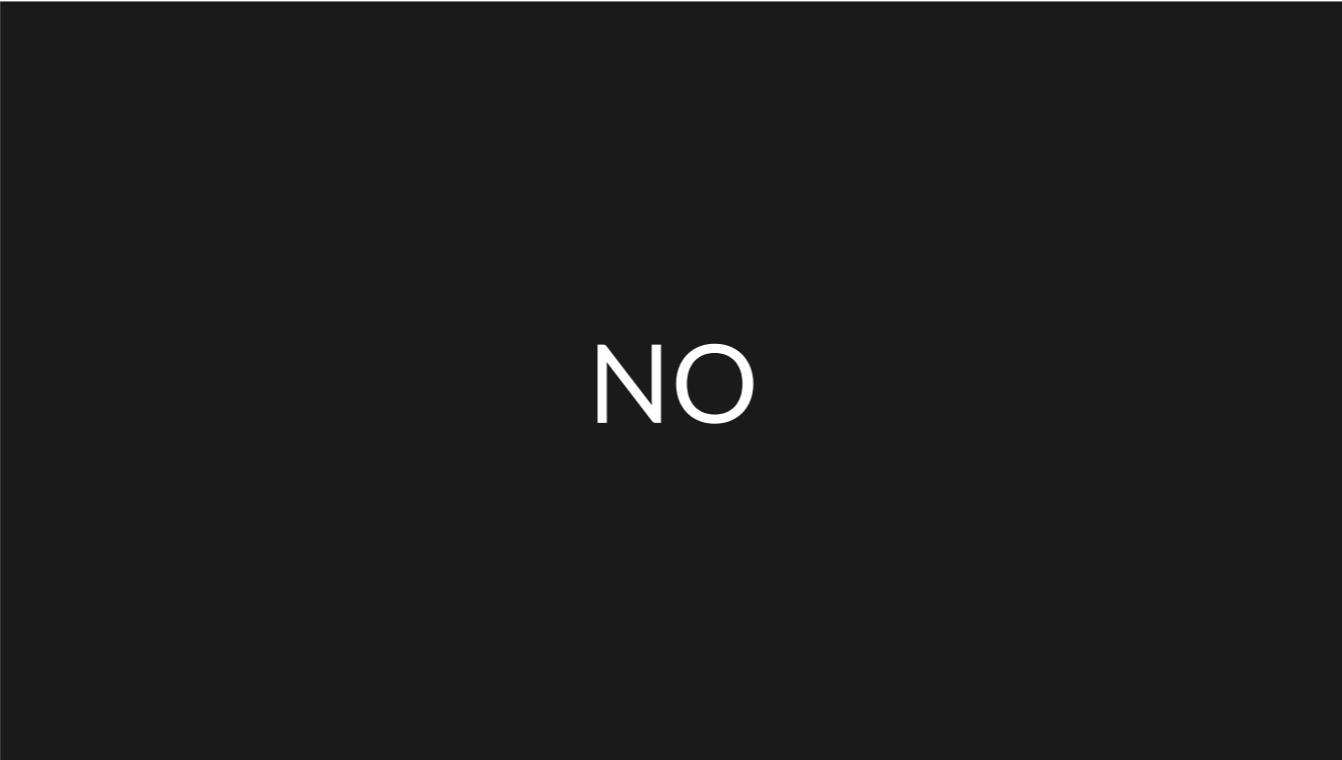
It wasn't remote working. It was \*distributed\* working. Remote implies distant, disconnected, which wasn't the case at all. As some viral zooms went to show, sometimes we were a little \_too\_ connected.



Pro tip, laptop does not belong in the bathroom.

# MARCH 767TH 2020

It's now March the 767th 2020 and we seem to be entering the "living with covid" phase of the pandemic. So are we now at the panacea that is the perfect distributed workforce?

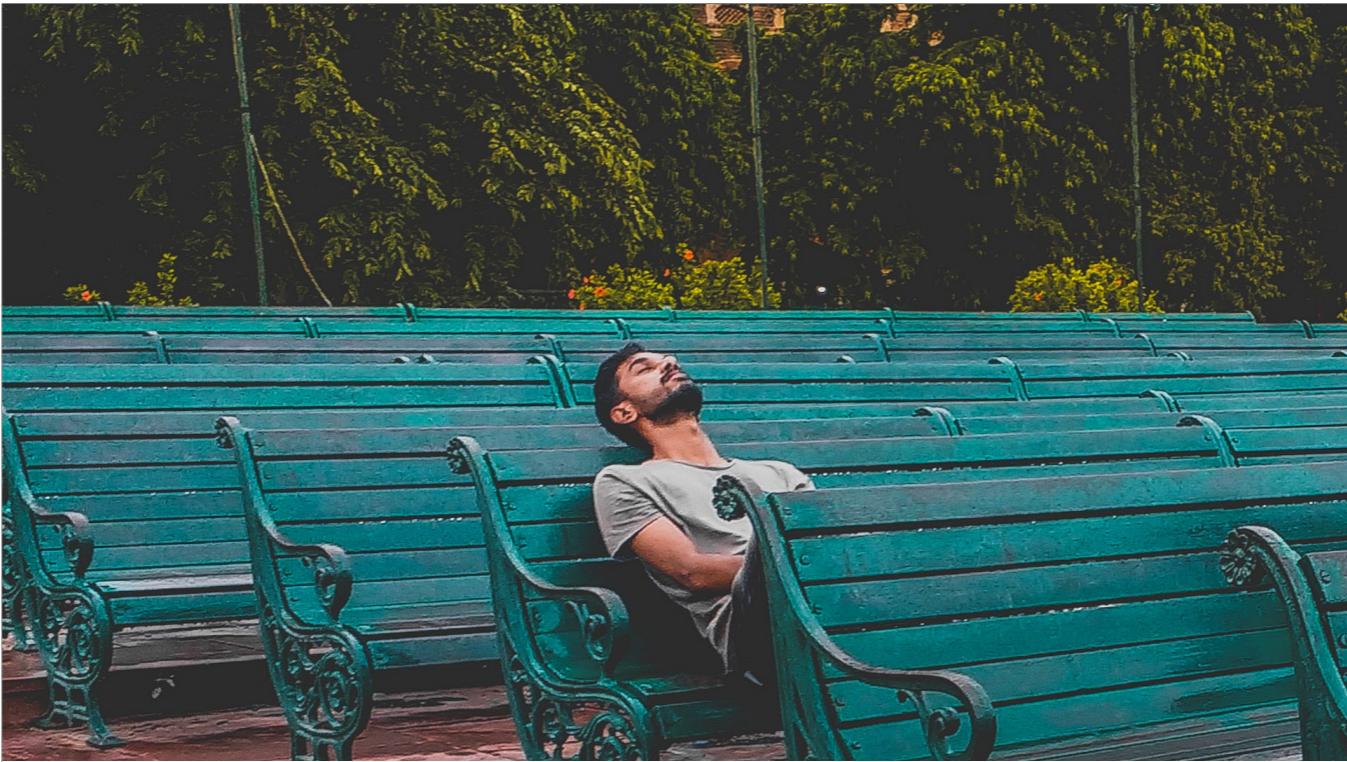


NO

No. Because humans.



When this all kicked off a large number of my friends were over the moon. No more commutes. Working with their own kit which was often better than the kit they had at work.



By about March 90th quite a few of them were sick of their home office. And we'd barely got to March 500th when even my most introverted friends confided that they were now over this isolation and wanted to go back into the office at least sometimes.



This is not to say that we should go back to how it was. Those people saying that a full scale return to the office is now required almost certainly have a very large property commercial property portfolio.



But perhaps we should have a hybrid model. One where people can work in an office if they want to, because either it suits them to work in proximity with others, or because their home situation isn't conducive to working.



One where people can work in other locations so that they can also attend to other demands on their time, like child care.

Experience: Yes  
Salary: £Neg  
Location: Remote Initially

And so we see roles posted with "remote working" as an option. Sometimes it's "remote initially", which is code for "when we open the office, you're coming in every day",

Experience: Yes  
Salary: £Neg  
Location: Remote, with 1 day per week on the office

sometimes it's "remote, but with a requirement to come into the office on a regular basis". But the common word is remote. And that worries me.



That lack of trust I mentioned earlier, is actually due to a lack of visibility. A lack of being able to see what someone is doing at any given time. And that lack of visibility is often down to a lack of communication. Because that person is remote. Distant.



But a distributed team; that works. And is a model that has worked for decades. Multinationals have been running distributed teams ... well, since forever.



C11N

So they key to all of this is communication, a 13 letter word which is probably now written as c11n - I mean that's what's happened to all the other long words in the field.

# COMMUNICATE

But I can't just go "communicate" and thank you for coming to my Ted talk. Partly because this isn't a Ted talk, and partly because that's a Heisen-Answer, telling you simultaneously everything and nothing. It begs the question: How do we communicate, to which I answer: "no idea".

# COMMUNICATE

But I have an excuse. I have no idea what the situation is for the individuals in your team or organisation. I have no idea what forms of conversations need to be had. What forms of communication technology are available. Of what is actually practical on a day to day basis.

# COMMUNICATE

Some teams might go fully distributed. They might run ongoing Google Hangouts that people join and stay joined to all day. Personally I'd hate that, and it also presupposes the ability to handle video calls. I have no idea of the prevalence of webcams in a corporate setting.

# COMMUNICATE

Some teams may choose to go back to being fully co-located. But that needs to be unanimously decided by the team, not an edict passed down from high, or pressure from a majority rule.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

I suspect the reality will be a hybrid, with some people choosing to come back to an office, and others choosing to remain distributed.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

And a proper hybrid solution should allow easy change, resulting in a fluid, dynamic distribution. But just because the distribution is dynamic, it doesn't mean the structure and communication should be.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

A hybrid solution is by its nature, one that can be distributed. Even if the majority the time sees distribution over a small area, such as a single office. A change to a wider distribution should not result in a change in communication.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

If it's not part of day to day culture, then that change won't happen when it needs to, and you're back to having people be remote part time.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

And, just like the co-located/distributed factor, there is a sliding scale for the levels of communication. You need to find your teams place on it.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

My personal ideal is to have conversations done through chat either via Slack or Discord. At a push it can be done via morse code by slamming my head in a drawer, and failing that, Microsoft Teams.

# HYBRID

1 2 3 4 5 6

Should we then need to jump to something higher bandwidth or less asynchronous I can then organise a video call, either direct in the messaging app there and then, or via one of a plethora of other options. If you can't do video, then voice. I try to avoid email. But that's just me.



Sadly my ideal isn't met by everyone so I have slack, discord, WhatsApp, signal, telegram, iMessage, teams, Skype, zoom and bluejeans installed on my laptop and also use FaceTime, whereby, google meetings and occasionally a few other esoteric video conferencing apps.



Which is an absolute pain in the behind. But I'd still need all of those if I was working in an office because of the nature of my job.



What works for me may not work for your situation. You're looking for a fairly unobtrusive asynchronous method of communication, plus a reliable and user friendly method of synchronous communication.



Many alternatives exist for both, up to and including email and telephone. If you are not able to use those two tools at the very least then one needs to ask much more serious questions about the organisation.



Honestly, the technology doesn't matter - provided it works. What matters is that a team is either co-located or distributed.



You cannot have a co-located team with one member working somewhere else. That is a distributed team. And the communication rules for a distributed team change because face to face voice communications, while great, suffer from a serious range limitation.



That's not to say that the members of the team that are co-located shouldn't talk. Absolutely they should. But they also need to be mindful of the distributed nature of the team and ensure that relevant information is disseminated in a timely and appropriate fashion to all team members.



And it's that "relevant information in an appropriate fashion" that is usually the sticking point. Too much information is arguably worse than too little information. You want the correct amount of information, using the correct channel for that information.



agile

1 2 3 . 4

If I can introduce another 4 letter word into the mix, be agile about the whole thing - although small "a" agile.



agile

1 2 3 . 4

Iterate. Change was doesn't work, keep what does. And don't stop iterating, because as the team evolves, so will its way of working.



agile

1 2 3 . 4

Hopefully the changes will be minor nudges in direction, but what you're striving for is the best way of working for your team in that moment. And only you and your team can know what that is.



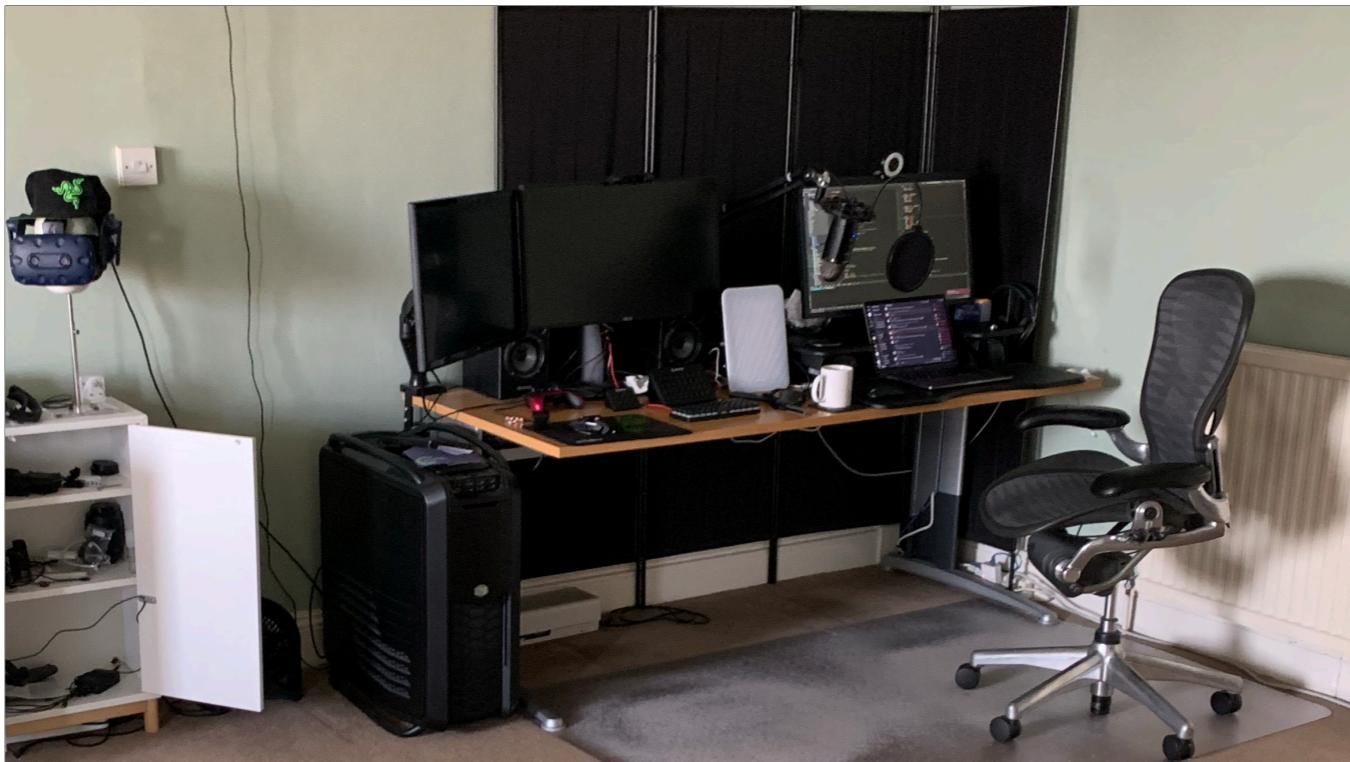
I want to finish up with the reason I started going back into an office. I was working from home, and I had a very nice setup, a room to work in... and a family that didn't quite understand that interruptions could horribly derail my thought processes. So we rented an office.



This gave me a space to design our system, free of distraction. And when we gained some interns we kept the office, because it made sense to be co-located.



Also, the office was made as conducive to work as possible. Not frivolous things like pingpong tables, but setting people up with the kit and surroundings they wanted. We liked our office. We all had a say in it.



These days my personal situation is different. So I once again work from home. Should the requirement for a centralised co-located space appear in the future I'll revisit the situation.



Usually I live alone, although ironically enough parts of this talk were written with two children kicking about because it's the easter holidays. They're older now and require less looking after.



And despite my physical separation from my colleagues and clients, I am not remote.

accu  
2022

# REMOTE IS A FOUR LETTER WORD

DOM DAVIS

Remote is a four letter word.