

A presentation by <3 Jeremy!

How Not to be Lonely.

An Extrovert's Guide
to Working Alone



An Extrovert's Guide to Working Alone (no transitions)

Hi! I've been doing this conference thing for a few years, but this is my first time as a presenter. I'm pretty nervous, but I'll mask that nervousness with bravado and dad jokes. Presenting at a ruby conference is on my bucket list, so this is a kinda cool moment for me. Thanks so much for the opportunity. I really appreciate it, and I hope everyone gets something out of my ramblings.

I'm <3 Jeremy!

*The <3's silent,
but always there.*



I'm <3 Jeremy (auto reveal, 3s)

I'm <3 Jeremy!, cheerleader-in-chief of Think Through Math, where we use a bunch of computer-what-nots to help kids learn math. I live in Seattle, and most of my team is in Pittsburgh. Before that, I was the technical director at a digital agency, where I directed so many technicals. That wasn't a remote gig, but before that, I worked at a startup where we did weird machine learning things with calendars. I was remote to a team in Providence, though I did go back and forth quite a bit. And before that, I did interaction design and development for point of sale systems for salons. I was in Pittsburgh, most of my team was in Alaska, and my client was in Germany. There's a lot more to it and to me than that, but it's enough to get us going. I've, inexplicably, spent large chunks of my professional career working alone.

Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em.

That's the first rule of speech writing.



Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. (auto reveal, 3s)

I'm going to tell you about why I think and talk so much about working alone and communication. I'm going to tell you about the batteries in my brain and my body and how I figured out how mine worked. I'm going to tell you about working alone, and how to do more than just cope with it. I'm going to do my best to distill all of it into four actionable advices. And, when you put that all together, I will have provided a context where remote work not only feels possible, but desirable and sustainable.

The False Dichotomy of Intro- and Extroversion



The False Dichotomy of Intro- and Extroversion (no transitions)

Like `truthy` and `falsey` in javascript, nothing in life is simple. Of course intro/extroversion is a false dichotomy. We're mostly ambiverts. When we say we're either an introvert or extrovert, what we're really saying, I think, is that we have a typical preference on what we do to keep our batteries charged.

I identify as an extrovert. Which means, I recharge my batteries, most of the time, via social engagement. Introverts, on the other hand, recharge batteries via isolated activities.

As an extrovert, working in an office environment can be wonderfully fulfilling and empowering. With good social chemistry amongst coworkers, I can stay motivated and motivating, engaged and engaging perpetually. But that's not what this talk is about.

This talk is about how I survived--and eventually thrived--while working alone.

I was a weird kid.

*I continue to be
a weird adult.*



I was a weird kid. (auto reveal, 3s)

I suffered a speed impediment as a child. I stuttered to an extent that speech therapy was a part of my life, in varying prevalence, from age 6 to 18. There, I learned to think about what I'm saying. That is, I learned to identify hazards and holes in the word-road ahead, and use a set of skills to maneuver around them. I think this special attention to words and speaking net me many benefits, the most important of which is the ability to do what I'm doing just this moment: speak and be understood.

A lifetime of thinking about how I use words blossomed into an academic and professional interest in human communication. In high school, I lettered in Math--twice. My university education is in the liberal arts and social sciences. I snagged my first programming gig in 2004, and it's been my full-time occupation since.

These days, I bill myself as an _interaction engineer_. I care, very deeply, about how people communicate with each other, through systems. Most often, those systems are web applications, because that pays the bills. Not always, though. Like I said, I built point of sales machines, and, this one time, an interaction engineering effort involved a literal hack; taking four inches of the base of a podium with a hacksaw to create the illusion that a congressman was taller than he actually was. I'm a weird mix of writing and editing, programming and designing, social science and computer science.

A few assumptions.

- ❖ *My team is almost all local to each other. I'm the exception.*
- ❖ *We're a product shop.*
- ❖ *I was privileged to work with my team for 6 months before going remote.*
- ❖ *We use Hipchat and Github and Email and Twitter and GTM and Screenhero to stay in touch.*



A few assumptions. (click once to reveal)

A small disclaimer: I can tell you about what worked for me, in my situations. I've done this full-time, remote-across-timezones-and-continent three times over ten years. So that's what I'm going to talk about. I'm not qualified to tell you what will work for you in yours. I'm happy to talk with you about it, and help you figure out what'll work, though, so hit me up. Here's the situation I'ma talk about. . .

- My team is almost all local to each other. I'm the exception.
- We're a product shop, and not an agency or institution.
- I was privileged to work with my team for 6 months before going remote.
- We use a variety of text-heavy tools to stay in touch, plus a couple of voice/video options.

Some or none or all of those may apply to you. I'm hoping at least some. I don't think there's anything too uncommon about my arrangement, but it directly affects how I do stuff. Working in a consulting shop versus a product shop, for example, doesn't change the day-to-day programming work much, but it likely features more interaction with external clients. That's the kind of consideration that alters my approach to my work.

So while the following advice will be most applicable to people in situations similar to mine, I believe there's some value in it for everyone. Just remember,

The major takeaway:

Engage in *active*
communication!

The *how* is just as
important as the *what*.



#The major takeaway: Engage in active communication (no transitions)

Communication is the intentional transmission of messages. That's it. We could talk about what `_intentional_` really means, but it'd get all existential and frustrating pretty quickly.

So, in the name of moving forward, let's define intentional as: a mostly-conscious effort on the part of the individual. Yeah? That's not too bad.

Being in an office, we use all manner of communication. There's words, written and spoken, sure, but, equally important, there's gestures, movements, body positions, verbal cues that aren't words, non-verbal cues in place of words, and a couple dozen other things that I'm not remembering.

Being remote, I lose most all of these. We've all experienced this to some degree. Without verbal tone and pacing, conveying sarcasm or irony in a tweet is damn near impossible. The manner in which you alter the delivery of a message is as intentional and crucial as the message itself, even if it happens, seemingly, semi- or un-consciously.

Successful remote working requires active communication. That means willful, careful consideration of how you communicate in addition to what you communicate. As a remote worker, I have very limited communication channels available. My effectiveness, and productivity, and, ultimately, happiness at

Advice #1:

Grow a Voice.

I want you to meet
my friend Seejee...



Advice #1: Grow a Voice. (no transition)

Voices are grown, like gardens and muscles. It takes hard work and a little luck and a lot of trial and error. And once you start paying attention to your Voice, you begin to see the gardens others' are growing.

I want to tell you about working with this guy named Chris. I've known him for a couple of years now. We work really well together and we ship features like WHAT. We call him Seejee, because it's a really clever and memorable nickname. I want to tell you a little about working with Seejee because he's really helped me find and cultivate my Voice.

Seejee calls 'em like he sees 'em.



Chris Geihlsler
@seejee

Good friends are good.



Chris Geihlsler
@seejee

Promises all the way down.



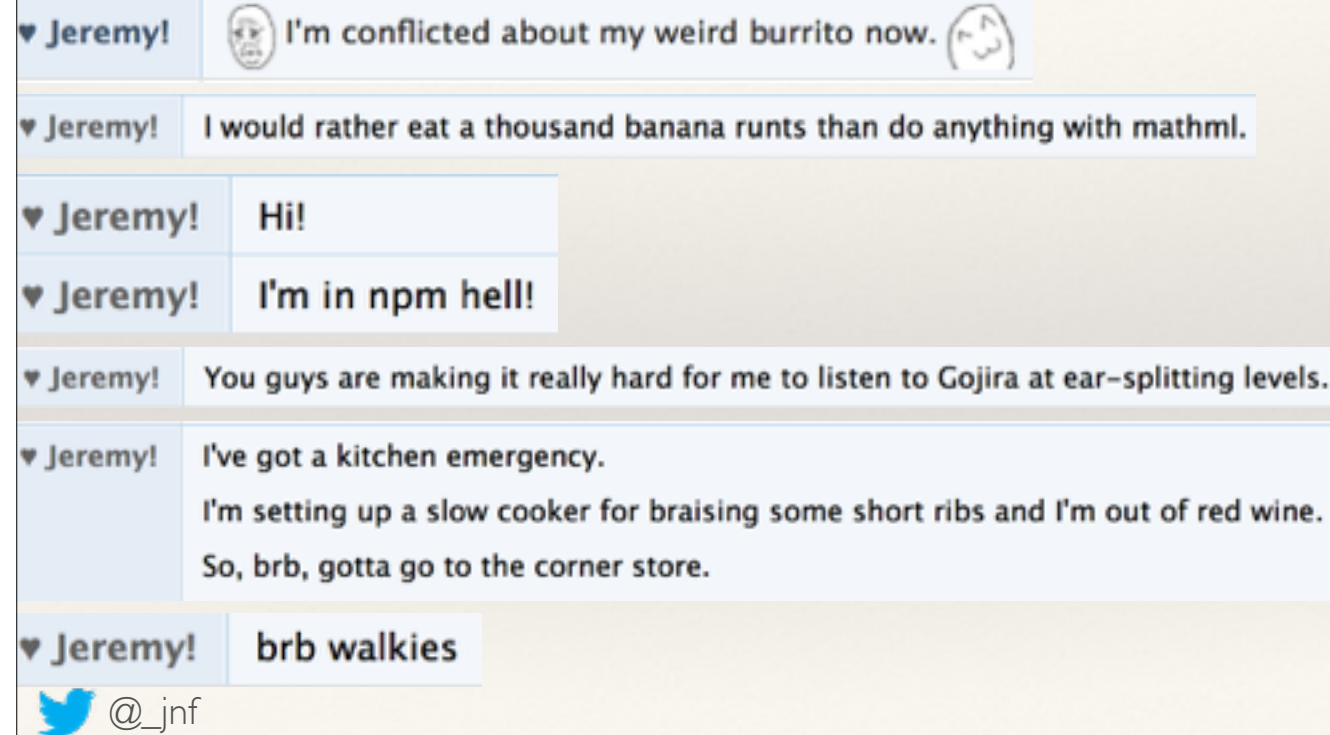
@seejee

Seejee calls 'em like he sees 'em. (no transition)

Seejee gets right to the heart of matters. He's a self-described introvert, but somehow hasn't tired of me. He's really good at his job and at being a friend.

When I worked in the office, I would know when Seejee was frustrated. He clipped his words more, a rattling cadence that was a stark contrast to his normally wide (and very Southern) flow. Most times, he wasn't frustrated with me, a fact confirmed by his body language and facial expressions. He'd lean back in his chair, wave a hand at the screen in front of him and say (in my general direction), "how the hell did this ever work?" The way he turned his body to face me, coupled with his slight smile and brow furrow told me that he was commiserating, not accusing.

My Voice:



My Voice: (click once to reveal)

How would this exchange work in a chatroom? How do I (or Seejee) commiserate instead of accuse? I don't have tone, cadence, facial expression, or body language to help me out. What I do have are. . .

* memes, emoticons, emoji, hyperbole, over-sharing, and poor spelling.

With these tools, I've constructed my Voice.

“I just totally read that
in your voice.”

–Seejee, May-ish 2014.



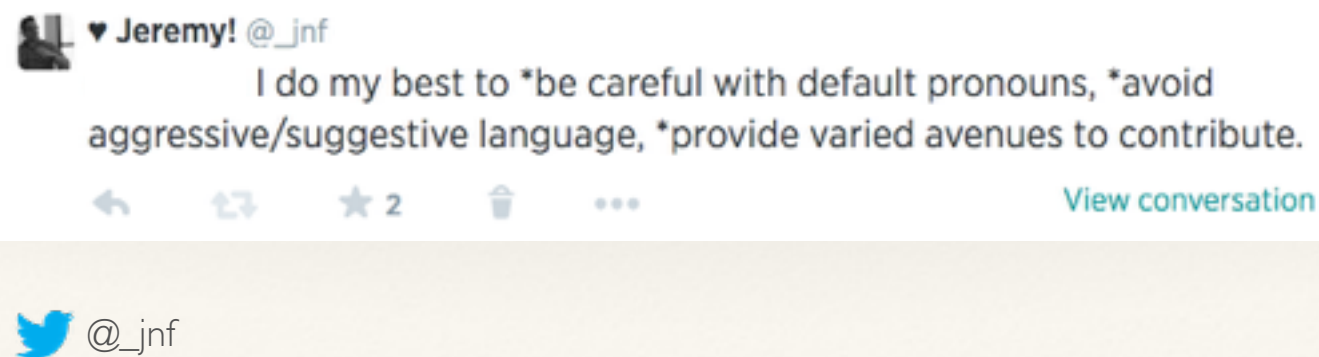
“I just totally read that in your voice.” –Seejee, May-ish 2014. (no transition)

They teach you in Business English to write like you talk and teach you in Creative Writing to never write like you talk--even dialogue should be your character's voice, not your own. Chatting with coworkers is in the middle; I’m working and I’m socializing. I’m explaining and I’m storytelling. I’m professional and casual. It’s a blend of fact and fiction and I gotta keep it in balance.

In my experience, coworkers associate long periods of radio silence in mostly negative ways: frustration, disengagement, confusion. So I err on the side of over- and hyper- communication. At times, I kinda feel like a caricature of myself, but the Voice is there and the result is that I'm more real, more relevant to the people on the other end of the wire.

Grow a Voice that's:

- ❖ **memorable** without being hard to decipher,
- ❖ **explanatory** without being condescending,
- ❖ and **inquisitive** without being confrontational.



Grow a Voice that's: (two clicks: bullets, then tweet)

Imma do that thing where I read exactly what's on the slide. You know, that thing the pros say you should never do. This is important, though, myabe even worth writing down. Cultivate your Voice so that it is. . .

(click)

- * memorable without being hard to decipher,
- * explanatory without being condescending,
- * and inquisitive without being confrontational.

It's gonna take some practice, and you're gonna make some mistakes. When you do, own them. Apologize and promise you'll do better. I'm still learning and working on my Voice.

(click) A friend recently asked on Twitter about strategies people employ to help newcomers feel welcome. This is was my reply, but, thinking about it later, it felt like fertile ground for your Voice garden. The default pronouns thing is something I'm still working on. I'll get there, and my friends and coworkers have been very gracious with my occasional "bros" and "guys" and "dudes" and "brothers."

Advice #2:

In which we discuss the management of batteries.

It takes more than coffee. Not much more, mind you, but a little more.



Advice #2: In which we discuss the management of batteries. (no transitions)

Advice the second: keeping them batteries alive. I've got two batteries. I think most people have at least two. I think of them as my Work and Life batteries. I'm holding my hands over my chest because, in my mind-brain, my batteries occupy the same space as my lungs.

My work battery, on the right side, governs my productivity and engagement. My life battery, here on the left and right over my heart, powers my happiness.

That's the division. I can be productive at work and not be happy with life. I can be happy with life and not be productive at work. Being both productive and happy is the sweet spot. In the sweet spot, all my activities draw from my batteries in balanced measures. I can work hard and feel good about using half my waking hours. I can enjoy a lazy (or busy!) Saturday and not stress the upcoming Monday.

When I get out of balance, I sap my Life battery to keep my work effort powered. That's my "crunch time," and the cost is a marked decline in my happiness, and the happiness of those around me. Likewise, if I don't make the effort to keep my Life battery charged, I get restless at work, leading to low engagement and high distraction. I'll seesaw between these states until I find a way to get back in balance.

Balance.

*Engage in non-work activities with
an optional social component.*

*Engage in professional efforts
with a mandatory social component.*



Balance. (two clicks to reveal bullets)

My strategy to balance is rooted in my extraversion. As I said earlier, a person's approach to battery management is a good metric for gauging their placement on the ambiversion scale.

Anyway, here's my sure-fire strategy to keeping my Life battery in good order. You might want to write this down: (click) I go do stuff where I might maybe talk to people.

Engage in non-work activities with an optional social component.

The optional social component lets me choose what I need. I can recharge or discharge at will. The key is an environment where I can absorb the scene or actively participate with others. The gym is awesome for this. If I'm overflowing and restless, it's trashy street punk and weightlifting until my arms literally fall off. If I'm low and need a boost, I can use the shared focus and activities to start conversations. Concerts are great for this, too, as are community events like farmers' markets and street fairs. That sounds counterintuitive on the surface, but my extroversion manifests such that I'm perceived as never tiring of social interaction, conversations with friends and strangers, and the like, but that's not true. And being alone in a crowd is a fantastic way for me to recharge that battery. Shared energy, shared focus.

Advice #3:

Use the best tools &
practices you find.

Takes more than a
hammer to be a
carpenter, but don't
skimp on that hammer.



Advice #3: Use the best tools & practices you find.

I'm going to be pretty brief here. This is a trial and error process, but you don't have to figure it out alone. Look around, talk to people who also work remote, and ask them what they've tried.

But, to get you started, here are three strategies that've worked for me

I can't think of a clever title for this slide.
So here's a list of three things:

- ❖ ❤️❤️❤️ *Screenhero* (screenhero.com) ❤️❤️❤️
- ❖ *Google Hangouts == GoToMeeting #=> true*
- ❖ *EVERYBODY'S REMOTE! XD XD XD*



Here's three things (three clicks to reveal bullets)

Screen Hero

I love to pair program. It lets me be chatty and productive at the same time. It helps me cement my understanding of unfamiliar concepts. It's another tool in maintaining my relationships with my coworkers. And it's damn fun.

We facilitate near all pairing sessions with Screen Hero. They just came out of beta, and are totally worth your dollars if you're a fan of software that works more often than doesn't.

Go To Meeting || Google Hangouts

These things are equally terrible, but in different ways. I like being part of the conversation, and these are the tools that let me do it. In a pinch, they can serve as a bridge for pairing, but Screen Hero is way better. If text communication isn't cutting it, have a easy way to jump into a video conversation. Do it enough that it feels normal to jump into a video call with anyone. Seriously, take time to practice transitioning a conversation from a text based format to a video call.

Everybody's remote!

Advice #4:

**Leverage the Positives;
Minimize the Negatives**

Celebrate,
don't emulate.



Advice #4: Leverage the Positives; Minimize the Negatives (no transitions)

Look, as an all-day-every-day remote worker, my environment is just different. If you try to force an experience that emulates an office job, you're gonna have a bad time. Working at home, I have unparalleled flexibility in my approach to work. Early in my remote career, I went to extraordinary lengths to recreate the office experience. This included doing things like waking up early enough to make standup. That 915 standup in Pittsburgh translated to 615am in Seattle. That's early; especially if you're accustomed to rolling into work around 9am. I did that for a couple of months, too, before approaching the CTO to discuss alternatives. Long story short, putting in those early mornings demonstrated that I was willing to do the work, to be flexible. It opened the door to conversations about compromise and adjustment to make things easier and better for me and our other remote workers.

These days, standup happens at a more reasonable time for me. My team appreciates that I'm more coherent and prepared, and I appreciate having a workday that doesn't start quite so early.



The Positives: Tomatoes, Time, & Coffee (click to reveal Rosa)

I still start early. My workday starts at 7am. My friends think I'm crazy, but I love it. This thing that started as a detriment—timezone differences—has become a wonderful positive. It took a few months for me to figure it out, but, now, I start at 7 and wrap around 3.

And when I say wrap, I don't mean just work-work. Typically, by 3pm, I've wrapped my not-work work too. How many of yinz follow the Pomodoro Technique? I'm not super strict with it, but the general idea is that for every hour you work, use five to ten minutes to rest, reset, and deal with distractions. At the office, maybe that means checking Facebook or getting another godawful cup of coffee.

For me, my Pomodoro breaks are walking the dog, changing the laundry, loading the dishwasher, checking the mail, and all manner of similar activities that eat into your not-work time. "But Jeremy," I can hear you thinking, "that's just more work! You're taking a break from work by doing work!" Yeah, that's kinda true, sure, but it's different work. It's a context switch. It's mostly physical and requires nearly no brain power. And that's what work-breaks are all about, right? Move around a little bit, rest your brain, hydrate. So why not get the garbage out or the dishwasher empty?

Let's talk a little more about time. Commuting is terrible. My worst commute was 90 minutes in a car, both ways. I did that for about a year. My commute, now, is from one side of my apartment to the other. Takes about six seconds. Fifteen if say hi to the dog. And I don't get time back just from commuting.

The Negatives:

Gossip, Inside Jokes, & Hugs

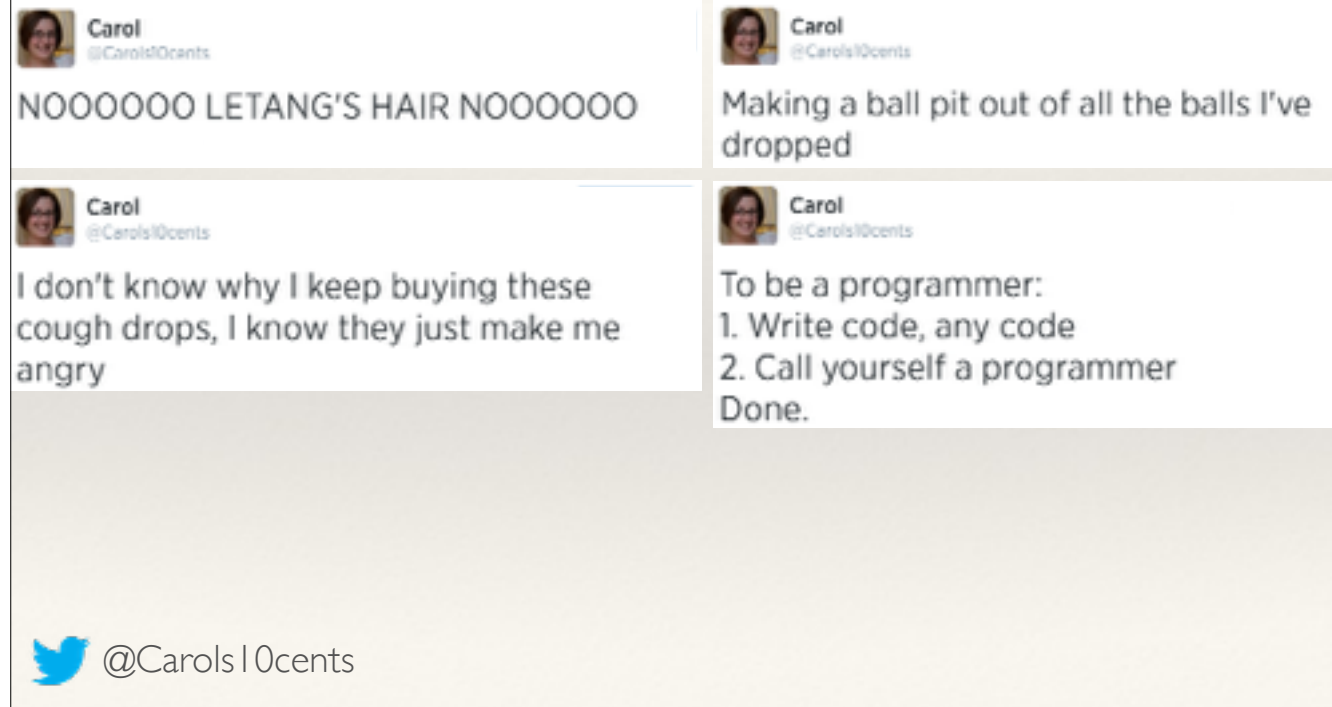


The Negatives: Gossip, Inside Jokes, & Hugs (auto revel, 3s)

It's not all sunshine and unicorns. There are definitely some things I miss about working shoulder-to-shoulder with others. The slide here makes light of it, but the atomic components of a team culture are comprised of shared experiences and peer validation. That is, gossip, jokes, and hugs. When you spend time with people—you know, like half your waking hours five days a week—they become significant in your life, and you in theirs. There's a camaraderie there, a relevance that factors into all manner of decisions and actions. Without physically being present, it's very easy for me to lose that relevance, and, with it, the consideration of my peers.

I didn't know how to address this for a long time, until I met Carol.

Yinz should meet Carol.



Yinz should meet Carol. (no transition)

Carol's known as the Hammer of Justice on our team. If that sounds intimidating, you're half right. But hammers build houses as readily as they knock them down, and Carol's a fantastic architect of both software and teams. I explained my growing ill-ease and feelings of irrelevance one afternoon. The next morning, she sent a calendar invite for a new event called "the whiskey hangout."

The Whiskey Hangout

It's every bit as great as it sounds.

Yay timezones!



The Whiskey Hangout: It's every bit as great as it sounds. (once click to reveal YAY)

Carol and I both enjoy craft whiskey. In fact, the first team-bonding event I organized at Think Through Math was a tour and tasting at a lovely craft distillery in Pittsburgh. Anyway, her idea was to re-create the 'water cooler' experience, except, you know, with whiskey and we're fifteen hundred miles apart. Twice a month, she'd work from home and, after the work day was over, we'd chat, via Google Hangout, and enjoy a whiskey drink.

She fills me in with what's happening in the office and city, and I tell her about my life in Seattle. We cancel when we have to, but, about six months in, we're still going strong. It provides the context I need to understand what's happening elsewhere in the business, lets me reconnect with a good friend, and I get to drink whiskey at three in the afternoon. Yay timezones! Pretty sure I'm the first person to say that, ever.

It's a fantastic tool to fight off those feelings of irrelevance and isolation. It's creating shared experiences and providing context for both of us. Others on our team and in our social circles have caught wind of what we're doing, and there's the first few murmurings of other Whiskey Hangouts—or similar events—in the works.

Tell 'em what you told 'em.

- ❖ *Grow a Voice!*
- ❖ *Manage your batteries!*
- ❖ *Use good tools!*
- ❖ *Leverage +’s, Minimize —’s!*



Tell 'em what you told 'em. (one click to reveal bullets)

So what's this all mean? It means that choosing remote work is choosing a different approach to work. If conducted with significant forethought and consideration, it can provide a lifestyle that minimizes the headaches of traditional office jobs without sacrificing the personal fulfillment of shared labor and experience.

I promised you at the beginning of all this four actionable things. To recap, they are:

- ❖ Grow a Voice!
- ❖ Manage your batteries!
- ❖ Use good tools!
- ❖ Leverage +’s, Minimize —’s

All of which are under the umbrella of engaging in active communication. Be intentional in both the what and how of your messages.

Fin.

Thank you so much
for this opportunity.
You're so great! <3



@_jnf

Fin. (no transition)

That's it! I really hope this helps you get your feet wet with remote work. With hard work and patience, you can learn to dislike wearing shoes just as much as I do. I'm around, here and online, if you wanna talk about it more. Thank you so much, everyone, for this opportunity to share. <3