

# Do You Need a Head of Remote?

Determine who should lead the logistics,  
policies, and support of your remote workforce.

# Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| What is a Head of Remote?                         | 3  |
| What a Head of Remote is NOT                      | 4  |
| Does your organization need a Head of Remote?     | 7  |
| How does the Head of Remote drive company growth? | 8  |
| Finding a Head of Remote & 5 OKRs for the role    | 9  |
| Take Action: Are you ready for a Head of Remote?  | 10 |
| About the Authors                                 | 12 |

# What is a Head of Remote?

For organizations with flexible work models — from the hybrid to the fully distributed — the head of remote role is growing in popularity. The people in this role are responsible for managing the virtual employee experience and implementing best practices for remote work throughout their organizations. **Not all companies need a head of remote, but all companies do need someone to advocate for the wellbeing of their remote workforces.**

Titles like “Head of Remote” and “Remote Work Director” have existed for years within a small circle of remote-first companies. Thanks to the events of 2020, hundreds more organizations have created similar roles in response to remote work’s mass adoption by necessity.

Pandemic-driven remote work is not the only factor driving the need for remote leadership roles, though. Now that companies can hire more freely across international borders, they need people who can manage the needs of their international teams.

Not all remote leadership roles are structured in the same way, either. Among companies with leaders in these positions, there are two primary types of roles, with key differences based on the organization’s objective for the position:

## Types of “Head of Remote” Roles

### Internal Advocates

The internal advocate’s primary responsibility is to ensure an equal employee experience across the organization regardless of where the employees live. This type of role is most commonly aligned with business operations or human resources. Responsibilities typically include monitoring employee performance, planning engagement strategies, and building digital resources for internal use. Having a single, dedicated advocate is important for hybrid organizations where the experience of converting to remote work varies for different employees in different regions.

### External Advocates

The external advocate’s primary responsibility is to tell the story of flexible work at the organization to the world. This position primarily relates to marketing and human relations, helping to attract top talent and support the company’s unique position as an innovative remote-first organization or remote-friendly product. Because of these thought leadership responsibilities, external advocates are most important for fully-distributed organizations or those with remote-friendly products.

That is not to say all Head of Remote roles fall neatly into either category, of course. Many of these leaders spend their time in both worlds, improving the internal experience while advocating for the remote-first model beyond the organization. Darren Murph, one of the pioneers of the Head of Remote role and the current Head of Remote at GitLab, is one such leader.



*“The Head of Remote role is intrinsically cross-functional. I work at the intersection of culture, operations, people, talent branding, marketing, and communication. My most critical responsibilities are to ensure that GitLab team members acclimate well to remote, give themselves permission to embrace our values and operate with remote-first workflows, and are equipped to share our learnings with those outside of the GitLab organization.”*

**- Darren Murph, Head of Remote, GitLab**

Just as the duties of a head of remote vary from one company to another, so does the distribution of the role's responsibilities. While some organizations dedicate an entire position to these functions, others ask existing leaders in business operations, human resources, marketing, and other departments to handle the work collectively. Let's consider which organizations need a dedicated head of remote position and which organizations can assign remote leadership duties to others. Is your organization next?

## What a Head of Remote is NOT

Despite the impression the job title may give, a Head of Remote is usually not responsible for ALL aspects of offering remote work to your workforce. A critical mistake that many employers make when considering the need for a remote work specialist is feeling overwhelmed with the change management process and seeking an expert to help update their operational infrastructure.

The problem with this is that the majority of remote work experts have a speciality of managing distributed teams or optimizing virtual processes, but almost none of them have been responsible for building the backend systems that enable workplace flexibility. They can maintain and optimize a virtual organization, but not construct one.

Jim Kalbach, Chief Evangelist at MURAL, sees his role as both an operational and strategic responsibility.



*“Head of Remote is critical in bringing clarity and order to the virtual collaboration for an entire company. They are responsible for not only a holistic toolset, but also the practices, habits, and behaviors the company has when working digitally. There is also an element of recruiting and hiring, keeping local working conditions and legal statuses in mind. More than that, a Head of Remote can have a big impact on the culture of a company by finding novel ways to connect people and foster deeper working relationships. The Head of Remote is a key role to guide companies into a new post-pandemic work reality and set them up for success.”*

**- Jim Kalbach, Chief Evangelist, MURAL**



There were very few individuals with experience constructing remote work models, policies, and infrastructures prior to 2020. This expertise takes years to build and refine, and it can't be replicated by someone who has worked remotely for less than a few years. Most of those subject matter experts have banded together in consulting firms to share their knowledge at a scale that meets global demand. These consultancies are the ideal option for companies in the early stages of adoption that need help with construction tasks, such as:

- Selecting tools and building infrastructure
- Writing or rolling out policies
- Managing change
- Developing management workflows and tracking methods

After the construction process is complete, a permanent Head of Remote can be recruited and trained by the consultancy to be responsible for fulfilling the company's long-term remote work goals (whether as internal or external advocate) and making optimizations as needed with leadership over time.

How do you know whether you are constructing your remote infrastructure or maintaining, though? Which practices are worth keeping, which need improvement, and which should be thrown out altogether? This chart can help you decide.

|                           | Signs You're in Construction   | Signs You're in Maintenance  |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Model</b>              | Permanent workplace options (i.e. hybrid, fully distributed, co-located) haven't been evaluated or announced.                                    | A long-term workplace strategy has been analyzed, constructed, tested, and announced.  |
| <b>Leadership Buy-In</b>  | Leadership team may be skeptical about the credibility and sustainability of remote work, or unwilling to work outside of the office themselves. | Leadership team fully supports and participates in the selected work model as a vital business strategy.   |
| <b>Compliance</b>         | Employee handbooks or policies haven't been updated beyond allowing employees to work from home.   | Employee handbooks or policies include mutual agreement on performance expectations, liability terms, salary adjustments, and/or employee experience support for remote workers. |
| <b>Workplace</b>          | Off-site workspace conditions (specifically health and safety) are unknown or unaddressed.   | Information security, ergonomics, and working conditions in home offices are verified to be safe and sustainable.  |
| <b>Training</b>           | Processes and performance expectations remain unchanged from what they were in the office.   | Learning and development program has been updated to include skills and tools that increase self-management and autonomy.  |
| <b>Management</b>         | Team leadership still relies on synchronous meetings and employee supervision to measure productivity.   | Performance expectations and measurement methods are based on metrics and empower team members to be autonomous.   |
| <b>Resources</b>          | Some company tools, people, and/or information aren't available when working outside of the office   | Team members have equal access to tools and information regardless of location, and expectations for use of tools has been communicated.   |
| <b>Talent Acquisition</b> | Hiring and onboarding process haven't been updated beyond conducting interviews via video call.  | From recruiting to screening to mentorship programs, the entire employee lifecycle prioritizes strategic talent acquisition and virtual support                                  |
| <b>Culture</b>            | Teams struggle to feel engaged and connected, including complaints of burnout and isolation.   | Culture and team unity is location-irrelevant. Team members feel visible and engaged no matter where they are located.   |

# Does your organization need a Head of Remote?

If you're in construction mode, you haven't optimized your operation for sustainable remote work and are likely still operating with emergency work-from-home protocols. Your priority should be to evaluate needs, make decisions, and to communicate and enact organizational change before moving into maintenance mode.

At this stage, don't get distracted by hiring a Head of Remote. Focus efforts on investing in an experienced remote expert to properly analyze your remote operations and help you usher in sustainable change at an organizational level before moving into maintenance mode.

If you're in maintenance mode, the majority of roadblocks and barriers to long-term success have been addressed, and you've reached some level of sustainability with remote operations. Your focus is on continuously monitoring employee experience and making adjustments as needed, but no major foundational changes are necessary to avoid monumental risks in attracting and legally retaining your remote workforce. At this stage, you are ready to consider a Head of Remote to advocate for and ensure equal employee experience.

The type of Head of Remote your company will need varies based on the percentage of the workforce that regularly works from a location other than the office (including mobile roles, such as installation crews or sales representatives).

| What percentage of your workforce works remotely?   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1% - 25%  | 25%-50%   | 50% - 75%   | 75%-100%  |
| On-site business typically continues as usual, so an internal advocate helps represent the minority of workers in operations and decision making to prevent risk of invisibility, such as career stagnancy, discrimination, isolation, resource inaccessibility, etc. | When almost half of the workforce works remotely, there tends to be increased competition between on-site and off-site employees. A Head of Remote continuously strategizes how to equalize employee experience and strengthen team loyalty, regardless of workplace. | In majority remote companies, remote workers still need an advocate, especially if most of the leadership team continue to work in an office. At this stage, the Head of Remote should invest heavily in asynchronous working infrastructure. | Operating as a fully-distributed organization enables the company to test new remote work methods and strategies at a faster rate. This innovation and thought leadership opportunities can be leveraged to attract talent or inspire progress in the industry. |
| <b>Internal Advocate</b>  |   | <b>External Advocate</b>  |   |

# How does the Head of Remote drive company growth?

Working remotely does not just mean working from home. In fact, working remotely can mean working from anywhere, any time. For companies with remote workforces, the natural question that follows “Can we hire remotely?” is “What should we do now that we can hire anyone we want?”



*“Ideally, remote work should empower workers to live and work anywhere in the world. The hybrid model can work, but only if company leaders recognise the need to create a remote-first workplace instead of just a remote-friendly one. With remote working set to become the standard for millions of workers, businesses and HR leaders must now focus on fostering sustainable remote company culture.”*

**Job van der Voort, CEO, Remote**

The Head of Remote is not just responsible for creating a good experience for people working from home in one country. Instead, the Head of Remote must account for all the permutations of remote work, which can include people in multiple time zones and people with different lifestyles. For example, the needs of a remote worker operating from her home in Germany will be dramatically different from the needs of a worker traveling from one country to another as a digital nomad.

This is where leadership on asynchronous work and a focus on diversity and inclusion become essential. The Head of Remote role is just as much about inclusivity as it is about productivity. In creating and overseeing remote work policies, the Head of Remote must consider the needs of a multitude of different lifestyles.

An effective Head of Remote empowers their company to employ great people regardless of location. The difference in talent between a company that can only hire locally, or even in a single country, and a company that can hire from anywhere is astronomical. The Head of Remote must understand how to leverage this advantage to its greatest potential.



# Finding a Head of Remote & 5 OKRs for the Role

To review, your company is ready to fill a Head of Remote role if you've determined at least one of the following:

- ❑ You are out of the construction phase and into maintenance mode with your remote work model.
- ❑ The minority of your workforce (<50%) is remote and needs representation in operations and decision-making (Internal Advocate Profile).
- ❑ You would benefit from dedicated efforts to tell the story of remote work at your company to attract talent and support your positioning in remote thought leadership, marketing, and recruiting (External Advocate Profile).

## How do you fill the Head of Remote Role?

To manage all aspects of remote work in your organization requires a diverse set of skills in the person who fills the role.

| 5 OKRs of a Internal Advocate Head of Remote  | 5 OKRs of a External Advocate Head of Remote   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hiring &amp; Onboarding</li> <li>● Learning &amp; Development of Virtual Workforce + Managers</li> <li>● Monitoring of Local HR Compliance (Employment Laws, Taxation)</li> <li>● Employee Experience, Virtual Culture, &amp; Engagement (Equal Access, Retreats, etc)</li> <li>● Workplace &amp; Real Estate</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Supporting Marketing Strategy</li> <li>● Public Speaking &amp; Brand Awareness</li> <li>● Talent Attraction &amp; Employee Experience Marketing</li> <li>● Content Development &amp; Production</li> <li>● Thought Leadership &amp; Networking</li> </ul> |

Remote work was a small topic prior to 2020, and very few professionals have long-term experience that meets all of these criteria. If you're seeking a candidate with corporate executive experience, it will be most effective to hire a remote work consultancy to recruit from their network of subject matter experts. But be warned, you will need to be prepared to pay a scarcity premium for this rare expertise — salary expectations can start at \$250,000 USD or more.

For organizations that don't want or need to make this level of investment, there are plenty of other options to ensure your company can thrive as a remote-friendly organization.

- **Convert** a champion employee from human resources, marketing, or operations into a Head of Remote who is already familiar with your company and culture.
- **Hire** a strong candidate with some remote work experience, then offer the support of an on-call consultant or coach for them to strengthen any areas where they may feel unqualified.
- **Contract** with a remote work consultancy or training company to train your leadership on how to be their own Heads of Remote and eliminate the need for a dedicated role.

## Take Action:

### Are you ready for a Head of Remote?



*"It's really a range of finding someone with some real cross-functional experience that will be comfortable partnering with numerous different teams, getting involved in everything and putting the employees at the heart of every decision that we make. The unique thing is that you can tailor the role to suit your own company's needs."*

**Jonathan Killeen, Head of Remote, Hopin**

Use this list as a quick progress check to see if you're out of Construction and into Maintenance. If so, you may be ready for a Head of Remote. If not, you know what needs to be tackled to put your organization on the road to a more sustainable work model.

- Percent of workforce that will be remote long-term has been determined.
- Leadership has bought into remote work as a long-term business strategy.
- Policies and handbooks are updated for remote work.
- Learning and development programs have been updated to foster autonomy and self-management.
- Home offices and verified to be safe and productive.
- Team members have equal access to tools, people, and resources, regardless of location.
- Asynchronous communication is the default internally.
- Talent acquisition, onboarding, and offboarding have been updated for a virtual environment.
- Culture and team unity is location agnostic.

You can also use this helpful chart to see the duties and responsibilities for a Head of Remote in one simple workflow.



# About the Authors

## Remote

Remote empowers companies of all sizes to pay and manage full-time and contract workers around the world. We take care of international payroll, benefits, taxes, stock options, and compliance in dozens of countries. No matter where your team lives and works, our best-in-class global employment solutions provide the best experience for your workers. Our ironclad intellectual property protections and industry-leading security guarantee give you peace of mind across the globe. Best of all, Remote never charges percentages or fees: one low flat rate helps you control your budget so you can focus on growing your business.

[www.remote.com](http://www.remote.com)

## Distribute

Distribute is the world's foremost thought leader and consulting firm specializing exclusively in remote work. Distribute's team of international remote experts helps remote and hybrid organizations optimize virtual operations and organizational behavior, through policy construction, resource development, and change management.

[www.distributeconsulting.com](http://www.distributeconsulting.com)