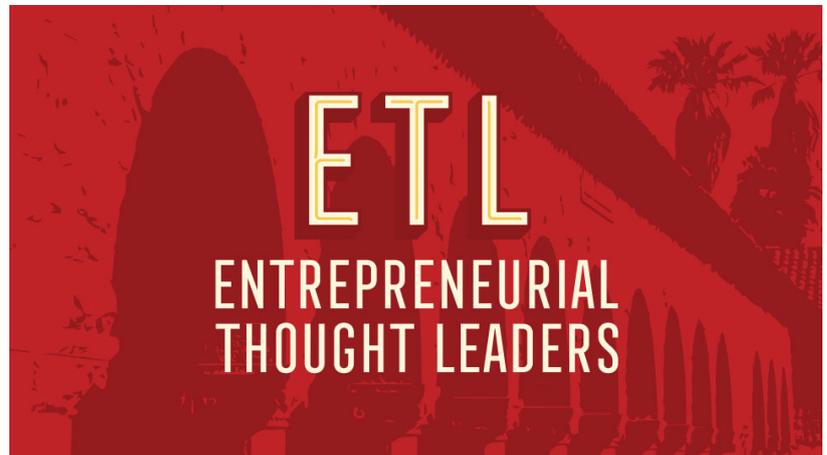


URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/podcasts/2020-insight-innovating-at-a-distance/>

In this special micro-episode of ETL, Stanford professor of the practice Tina Seelig reflects on her key entrepreneurial takeaway from 2020. Seelig observes that, especially in times of great change and uncertainty, entrepreneurs can be empowered by the necessity to innovate. When it comes to COVID-19, the challenges of the pandemic also presented an opportunity to refine remote work. Seelig shares a clip from Digits co-founder Jeff Seibert's 2020 ETL talk "[Making Remote Work Better](#)," in which he explains how his company has leveraged remote work to drive both efficiency and creative collaboration.



Transcript

- Hello, ETL fans.. I'm Tina Seelig, Professor of the Practice at Stanford university.. I'm here to introduce a special series of ETL episodes.. Over the next several weeks, Stanford faculty members who hosted our 2020 ETL series will be here to offer their key takeaways from a truly unique year.. 2020 has defied all of our expectations.. From the challenges posed by the pandemic to the dramatic shifts in the workplace and the ways we collaborate, our personal and professional lives have been disrupted.. With this backdrop the entrepreneurs and innovators who visited ETL this year also brought us weekly lessons on how to find agency in times of crisis and uncertainty.. Today I'm here sharing my takeaways from the 2020 ETL talks.. If entrepreneurs take away one lesson from this year, it's that even in times of trouble entrepreneurs find opportunities.. Every problem is an opportunity and the bigger the problem, the bigger the opportunity..

Knowingness empowers each of us to look at the world as opportunity rich and full of possibility.. In fact, some of the most successful companies have been founded during economic downturns or times of great disruption.. Examples include Revlon in 1932, Microsoft in 1975, and more recently, Instagram, Uber, Airbnb, and Slack all founded during the 2008, 2009 recession.. These examples inspire us to see the diamonds hidden in the ashes.. Jeff Seibert co-founder Digits shared a timely example when he joined us for ETL in July.. In this clip, Jeff talks about all the things he and his team did to build their company completely remotely.. This was done in the advance of the pandemic and has provided valuable guidance on how to make working remotely, at least as effective as working together in person.. Let's listen to Jeff's clip.. - When Wayne and I were starting Digits, we realized that this was a long-term mission.. This was not going to be a quick flip of a company..

Building a whole finance stack is very challenging.. And so we wanted to set the company up for long-term success, and we knew we couldn't hire the size and caliber of team we wanted all in San Francisco.. So we would have people who worked for Digits elsewhere.. And so then it became, do we go down this remote office path, which we'd seen quite well or do we try something new? And I had a feeling that there was huge advantages to being fully remote in terms of putting everyone on the same level playing field.. You didn't have this sort of second class citizen character that came out with having these distant offices.. And so it was an experiment.. I'd say honestly, even a number of our own investors in Digits were originally quite skeptical and it's just been magical in how it's played out honestly.. Like now I wouldn't consider any other approach.. And the majority of our team has told me they would not go back to an office in the rest of their career.. Like they view this as a far superior way of working..

So there's different degrees to going fully remote.. One of the big things we decided to do is be remote, but synchronous.. So we're not just, oh people around the world working whenever.. We have agreed as a company to basically work central time.. And so there's a bit of a skew East coast, West coast based on people's hours and when they dinner but the vast majority of the team is all online at the same time during the core of the day.. And that makes so many things easier because you can have direct conversations, you can work with each other face-to-face even though you're on screens.. It makes it a lot easier.. So we had this advantage that we were designing the company from scratch to be remote, right? And so we could really optimize every process in order to make that effective.. And so we've done a few things that I think are quite different from other companies.. So we run a really tight cadence..

We do weekly sprints.. And so we kick off the whole team every Monday, everyone sets goals for the week together.. We do

Wednesday check-ins, basically checking in on the status of projects.. And then we do Friday show and tell, which is my favorite time of the whole week.. And literally every group shows off what they built.. And it could be a product thing.. It could be some very deep technical logging solution or data manipulation on the product side or there'll be wire frames on the marketing side, there'll be blog content.. It's sort of all across the company.. And so that keeps everyone in close contact because you're basically seeing everyone every 48 hours.. Then we decided okay, every project, how do we go tackle it? And the danger with sort of working from home or from a coworking space is it's very easy to just be isolated and to sort of rabbit hole down in something like I'm stuck on a bug, or I'm trying to figure out a problem and all of a sudden hours go by, no one knows what you're working on communication breaks down, et cetera..

And so we decided from the early days to set up sort of a buddy system is what we call it.. And so every project is basically tackled by at least two people, usually two to three people.. And what that means is you always have someone you're working with during the day on this project.. On the engineering side it's pair programming, on the product side is collaborative white boarding and wire framing.. On the marketing side it's co-editing blog posts.. And so we found that this scales actually quite naturally across the team.. And the easy critique is like, oh, you're wait, you're having two people do each job.. Isn't that inefficient? And we found the opposite.. So projects get done way faster with way higher quality, because you have the thoughts and ideas of two people all at once.. On the engineering side, your code review is built in because you're pair programming with someone..

And so you're not waiting for someone to review your pull request hours or days later.. And so it creates a great rapid fire progress there.. And it makes it more fun because now you are talking with someone, whether it be on video or audio, or just screen-sharing during the day and it feels like you're sitting right next to them.. And so that's honestly been super successful for us.. And I think makes the whole work from home thing more more collaborative to a degree than if you were all in offices and sort of running between meetings.. We change the teams every two to three weeks as projects emerge.. And so what this does is it prevents ossification.. You don't have someone emerge as sort of the defacto leader of this team and everyone just sort of naturally else falls into a subservient role.. You don't have someone decide, oh, they're the control person over this part of the product and they get to make all the decisions.. Like things ebb and flow across the team..

You get to work with a much wider range of people over the course of the quarter.. And it's, again, it's more fun 'cause it builds more trust and you build more relationships.. And so what we do is we scope things in what we call horizons.. So a horizon is roughly a month long and that's the duration that teams will be roughly stable for.. And then we do these series of weekly sprints.. And then as those projects wind down, we'll break apart that team, form a couple of new teams and take on new projects and go from there.. And so it's a really, it keeps it interesting and fun every week.. (upbeat music) - To learn more about this topic, please listen to Jeff's entire talk.. The link is available in the show notes.. Entrepreneurial Thought Leaders is a Stanford eCorner original series produced by the Stanford Technology Ventures Program at Stanford University's Department of Management Science and Engineering...