

MoS Episode Transcript – Matt Mullenweg

REID HOFFMAN: Hi listeners. We are currently hard at work on the next season of Masters of Scale. And just like everyone else, we are grappling with the challenges brought on by the Corona outbreak. A big one of these is the sudden, unexpected shift we have all taken to remote working. Just like so many of you, I am also working from home. In fact, I'm recording this podcast from home, which is why I sound a bit different than usual.

There are so many companies – and entire industries – that have transitioned to fully-remote work. This transition is different for everyone, but there is a lot to learn from founders that have been all-in on the work-from-home culture since long before this crisis. So we've drawn on some unreleased material from the Masters of Scale interviews for a series of bonus episodes. Matt Mullenweg is the founder of Wordpress, which is a fully remote company. So he's the perfect person to talk to about how to approach work-life in the Corona-era.

I recently interviewed Matt for the show, and wanted to share a part of our conversation. There are so many great insights that I think you'll find helpful. We'll have a full episode with Matt in the next season of Masters of Scale, but I wanted to get this segment out to listeners as soon as possible. And if your company has found an interesting solution to the challenges of the current crisis, send us an email at hello@mastersofscale.com. We'll look for a way to amplify your idea. I hope you enjoy my conversation with Matt Mullenweg.

HOFFMAN: So, obviously one of the things that a lot of companies are confronting right now with COVID-19 is, "Look, we want to be good for our employees, we want to be good for our society, we want to not make group aggregations happen so as to spread – maybe even hopefully contain the spread of the disease – but now this is an entirely new muscle for us. This isn't the way that we're operating." What's the advice that you would give these companies for quickly putting some of the key things in place to make distributive work, work?

MATT MULLENWEG: I wish I had a time machine. I would go back. So what I was saying last year, months ago, etc.: Pick a day a week for everyone to work from home. Call it work from home Wednesdays, and see what sort of stress lines that shows. What works well on that day? And what's hard? Then identify the things that are hard that day and try to work around them. This is probably the number one thing. What you will find from that is documentation and communication becomes really key.

So, I joke that that's a level-one autonomy. Take whatever you did in the office and now do it at your computer, not in the office. That is a really, really valuable exercise and you'll find silly things like a lot of people have weird VPN setups, or other things that are just a barrier, or they're unable to access the internal employee handbook or some tool. Just work out all those things. Those are basics. That's level one.

That's also a little bit like when movies first were created, moving pictures. They're the first films where just one camera watching a stage, and they do a play. It wasn't actually taking advantage of the medium, or what you could do with a film or cinematography, or anything like that. So, that's level one, right? Level two is when you start to say, "Okay, what's actually enabled by us being distributed? That's more powerful."

So that's when you start to look at, okay, actually a remote meeting is a lot better when you have one person, one screen. Let's start investing in headsets and maybe even better cameras, or lamps for people's desks so people look and sound professional wherever they might be. You start to get a little bit of, "Could this meeting have been an email?" It's a good opportunity to reexamine some things you might be doing by default, that you could get the same outcome with a different process. One that might be a lot more efficient.

Level three is what I think of as asynchronous. So level two, you're still synchronous. Level three, you can move from synchronous to asynchronous. When you can become asynchronous as an organization, it unlocks so much productivity and so much autonomy for you and your colleagues. Think of it like even if a company had a policy that you could leave during the day to pick up your kids from school, it might be socially awkward if all your colleagues were there, for you to drive away from 2:00 to 3:00 PM every day.

So, there's almost some social norms or mores that discourage things that philosophically, the company might be totally okay with. Once you're not in that office environment, those go away, and someone could very easily design the day – and many people at Automattic do. Where even though they work full work days, just as hard as anyone in the office, if not harder, they can drop their kids off and pick their kids up every day from school. So, you can find those moments of high leverage: What it is a point when – it might only take 30 minutes – but it's in the middle of the day, and it could have a big impact on a loved one or yourself. Exercise during the day.

One thing I like to do that I would find too awkward to do in an office is in between meetings and stuff, I just like to do some exercises: some squats, some pushups. Just little micro things throughout the day. Could I do that in office? Yes. Would I feel super weird? Yes. So take advantage. Maybe that's level four, when you start to really embrace little micro habits or ways you can improve your day.

I have a candle on my desk right now. I love candles. Just something about them relaxes me. They smell good. I don't think you can do that in an office. If everyone had a candle, it would be a disaster. You'd probably set the smoke alarms off. But when you're working from home, you can design your environment to be what suits you really well. And wow, I think of it that once you have that taste of freedom, it's hard to return to your previous state.

I think there's an element of that happening unintentionally right now with people doing distributed work. So we're going to have this temporary crisis. Hopefully it's short, hopefully it passes. But when you return to the office, re-imagine what you're doing. Try that one day a week where everyone works from home. Maybe open up a little bit, saying maybe one day a week in the office versus five days a week in the office.

By the way, how much we'll be able to save that currently goes to landlords, both directly from companies having to pay to have a space for 100% load of the company all the time, when maybe it only needs to be 20%, but also how much of each person's paycheck is going to landlords because they want to have a reasonable commute, so they need to live close to these kind of high-value areas, Mountain View, Cupertino, whatever. That all gets unlocked, and you can then take that commute time, take that part of your salary that's going towards that, and apply it to something that can make a really big difference in your life.

HOFFMAN: Yep. Well is there any question on the distributed work that you think I should ask you that I haven't?

MULLENWEG: So you know the management writer Peter Drucker?

HOFFMAN: Mm-hmm.

MULLENWEG: He has a book called *The Daily Drucker*, and it's a compilation where it's one little page from his vast array of writing that you read every day. And I keep it on my desk, and I actually read a page every morning. And what's interesting is a lot of this was written in like the '70s and '80s, pre-internet and stuff. And it's 100% relevant. Most of the issues that I find challenging scaling a distributed company are the same as my friends at Dropbox, Facebook – whatever that company might be that's in an office. As soon as that in-person company starts to be on more than one floor, you run into the same challenges. At Google, it takes so long to get between the buildings, people just do video conference even though they're on the same campus. Because they're back to back in meetings.

So I think that you can really embrace these things, and the challenges aren't that different. So what makes a great distributed company is almost exactly the same things that make a great in-person company. It's trust, it's communication, it's transparency, it's open-mindedness and iteration, these qualities. If anything, use being distributed unexpectedly because of an office closure or deliberately, like you're working from home one day a week, as an opportunity to just rethink everything you do. If this makes the interview, I hope that everyone listening just kind of, if you were describing your day to an alien, what would it sound like? How would it... Just try it

So much of our lives, we live by default. We do something today because we also did it yesterday. And any chance you have to kind of zoom out, re-imagine, look at it with a beginner mind or fresh eyes, I think could have a huge impact on any person's life regardless of the work situation.

One thing I worry about with people working from home, because I know I myself – a work from home expert – am struggling with it right now, is distraction. So we're in a crisis, a global crisis. And my vice is definitely news. And so I have to be conscious, and I've started to really measure my screen time. I need to timebox how long I'm going to read the latest updates of everything that's going on in the world. And so I'll literally set a timer for 25 minutes and I'll say, all right, when this is done, I'm going to close all the websites, I'm going to close all the things. And we have these distraction boxes in our pocket. We have some of the smartest people in the world getting us to open notifications and look at ads and click on things, and we don't yet have the antibodies for how to resist that. It's going to require probably some mistakes and a lot of willpower and self-discipline to overcome the natural distractions of this.

My one worry is that as everyone starts working from home, they'll start to face these challenges in a different way for the first time, and so we might say, "Oh, that didn't work. People weren't as productive." But I don't worry about this too much because I think people are also very distracted in the office. It's actually, if anything, easier to slack off when you show up in the morning and last person to leave and are dressed well and everything like that than when you're distributed and the only measure of your productivity is your actual output. It's not whether you said smart things in meetings, it's like did you get the work done?

HOFFMAN: When you're building remote teams, how do you foster culture? How do you make the culture of "this is who we are" spread the right way and what are the things you do? And in particular, one of the things that Automattic I think emphasizes, which I think is a very good thing, is a learning culture. Always be learning, don't presume you know stuff. But how do you make that culture work?

MULLENWEG: I think someone's experience of the culture starts from the first day they visit your website and think about applying. So, you start to define what that employee experience is like from what's it like when they apply? What kind of responses do they get? What sort of qualities do the people they interact with exhibit? What's the design of those internal tools they're doing? How's the hiring process? What's the offer letter? We put a lot of thought into all those things.

Automattic has a creed, [Automattic.com/creed](https://automattic.com/creed). After reading Dan Ariely's book around, I think it was *Predictably Irrational*, where if you read something and sign your name next to it, it means more. On the offer letter, after all the legalese, but on the page where you sign, we put the creed. So you're actually signing up for this when you accept the offer.

And we just try to be reasonable. Then finally, you get onboarded with your team and so you do things like Zoom, like we're doing now. There's a lot of documentation that we ask people to read. There's these internal blogs you could start to read and catch up on. That makes a huge difference.

HOFFMAN: What, if anything, have you learned to try to help accelerate the learning clock of individuals in the organization? Obviously one that you already talked about is, "Well, we shift from email to blogging because then we can all see it and learn."

MULLENWEG: Having knowledge not die in inboxes is huge. So the collective wisdom of the company can really grow with this internal blogging system. It's called P2. Then we use an internal learning management system called Sensei. It's actually real time WordPress. You can learn things, quizzes. We've started to use that in the WordPress.org community as well for onboarding new contributors so they can learn more about how a certain system works, or how to run a WordCamp, or an event, or things like that. We've found that these things work pretty well, to be honest.

The "X factor" is always motivation. So what I find is that it's never been a better time to learn things. There's literally all of the knowledge of humanity at your fingertips, but what holds people back is the presence of motivation. So, I find that if we can get the mastery, autonomy, and purpose in place, where people have the trust to work how they like, they are working for something larger than themselves, that's a purpose. For the mastery part of it, it's different for different people, but we can provide the same information five different ways. As a podcast, as a link to a book, as a blog post, as a whatever. They'll get it, and it's huge.

The one thing I wish I did a little bit more that I've been thinking a lot the past few days is just recommend books. I've had a few people say to me – the past week even, so maybe this is recency bias – that they read a book that really changed the way they thought about things. I take it for granted, because I'm trying to read all the time. I usually read at least 30 books a year, and also because I was a new CEO I was like, "I have to read a ton of business stuff before someone figures out I don't know what I'm doing." So, I've started to try to recommend books a bit more, and sometimes it takes people a little while to get through them, but a good book can really shortcut, I think, years of trying to learn things from blog posts, or podcasts, or anything else.

HOFFMAN: What are two or three books that you recommended recently or top of the recommendation list in the last year or two?

MULLENWEG: Two that come to mind are actually around words and language. Words create reality. When you're distributed, more of your communication is written. So, it becomes really key and the two there I love are *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser, a late professor. It's, as you would expect, beautifully written.

The other is from something a little outside my normal wheelhouse, is a gentleman named Frank Luntz, who's a Republican pollster and strategist, which ideologically is separate from me, but I read this amazing book called *Words That Work* where he talks about how language can completely change how people perceive the exact same ideas. I think about that all the time. It's amazing in interface as well. The copy can completely transform more than any other design changes how people interact with something. So, those are two I recommend a lot. I love Krista Tippett's *On Being*.

HOFFMAN: Mmhmm.

MULLENWEG: Amazing. That book changed my life in a lot of ways. I recommend a lot around meditation, although often then I'll recommend apps than necessarily books because it's a practice, it's not something you just read about. The one that was probably most influential on me, really opened my eyes and my world, was Nassim Taleb's *Black Swan*.

HOFFMAN: Right, yep.

MULLENWEG: Which was the first book I read of his, and it wasn't just interesting on its own as an interesting thesis, but it had so many references and allusions to other work that it set me off for several years just trying to read some of the things that he had read that lead him there. That, for me, was an intellectual tipping point of my awareness, of things going on in the world.

HOFFMAN: I presume you've read *Antifragile* as well, because obviously there would be some ties to that in the WordPress ecosystem.

MULLENWEG: I'm obsessed with *Antifragile*, and I do try to design Automattic that it gets stronger in times of adversity. We're going through one right now. So, I am very fascinated to see how the structures we put in place will fare under adversity, because a rising tide lifts all boats. In a bull market, everyone looks smart and we'll find out for ourselves, what just happened to be coincided with success and what actually is a driver of success in this more challenging market.

I want someone to be able to change everything they do just within Automattic. So, there's teams that do daily standups, maybe on video even, and there's teams that only communicate through IRC – and that's okay. Whichever is your jam, you can find a team inside Automattic that fits that. So, we allow a lot of, what's the word? Heterogeneity around working styles – and even software being used, project management, source control – within the company as part of the way to help make us hopefully more resilient or even antifragile in adversity.

HOFFMAN: I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Matt. If your company has found an interesting solution to the challenges of the current crisis, send us an email at hello@mastersofscale.com. We'll have another bonus mini-episode for you soon, and brand new full episodes of Masters of Scale in April. I'm Reid Hoffman. Thank you for listening.