

How to engage your remote team by building a community-first culture

With Lauren Piro, People & Culture Director, Quiip

Maddie Duke 00:08

You're listening to *The State Of Work*, the podcast by Lano. *The State Of Work* is about finding your place in a changing world of work as an individual or an organization. In each episode, we'll dive into some of the benefits and limitations we face when it comes to remote and flexible work. We'll discuss how we work, how we hire and manage people, and how we live in this increasingly global workplace. I'm your host, Maddie Duke. And in this episode, we learn about online community management and how the principles of effective community management can be used to improve remote workplace culture and ensure it's not only transferable from offline to online workplaces, but also scalable as your business grows. Today's guest is Lauren Piro, Head of People and Culture at Quiip, a team of community management experts specialized in minimizing risk and maximizing engagement in online communities. Quiip also provides training in all aspects of community management, including enterprise community management. *The State Of Work* is brought to you by Lano, an important tool for building and scaling remote teams. Lano makes it easy to hire the best talent on the planet, wherever they may be. Hi Lauren, and thanks for joining me on *The State Of Work*.

Lauren Piro 01:38

Hi, Maddie. Thanks for having me.

Maddie Duke 01:40

It's our pleasure. So you're the head of people and culture at Quiip, which is Australia's leading team of online community managers and business which has been fully distributed for, is it 10 years?

Lauren Piro 01:53

Yeah, so the unusual thing about Quiip is we were established as a fully distributed team. So we never had a head office and then transitioned into remote work. We started as a 100% distributed team, right from the get-go, we actually also started as a 100% internationally distributed. Some of our first community managers were based abroad. So we, yeah, we have been fully remote right from the beginning.

Maddie Duke 02:20

Presumably, things were a little different for communicating between remote team members back then what sort of communications tools did you use 10 years ago, compared to what you're using now.

Lauren Piro 02:31

So initially, we had email, we had—we used Yammer as our internal community platform, so that's where we all collaborated. Obviously, now we're using Facebook Workplace, our internal platform, our internal communication platform. But look, initially, a lot of it was via email.

Maddie Duke 02:52

Wow

Lauren Piro 02:53

So it was a bit of a pain early on. But look, over the years, there have been so many different products that have been developed. And we've tried some of them, some of them have been for us, and they've worked really well with what we want to do. Some of them have not, and so we've moved on. And there are some that are still yet to be invented. There are a couple of tools, I think we'd all like that incorporate lots of different features that just don't seem to exist yet.

Maddie Duke 03:18

Yeah, well, I know that a lot of businesses use Slack for their asynchronous communications internally. Can you tell us a little bit about Workplace, kind of as an alternative to something like Slack and, and maybe some of the features that are available in Workplace?

Lauren Piro 03:36

So I think what works for us, particularly given that a lot of us come from community, well, we all come from community management backgrounds, but what most of us come from is forum management background. So if you think about the structure of a forum, they typically have different spaces for different conversations, and a lot of those spaces, threaded conversations. So we found that Facebook Workplace worked really well. And it was very similar to Yammer in the day as well. So it's sort of a system that we've transitioned from platform to platform. But we've got rooms that are dedicated for different things, so rooms or groups. So we've got our sort of head office, which is our general announcements section. And then each project team has their own separate space to discuss information, share information and resources and discuss decision-making for that specific project. In addition to that, Facebook has some nifty features that they've incorporated into Workplace, so obviously you have direct messaging, and a lot of this feels familiar because it looks like Facebook.

Maddie Duke 04:41

Yeah, it's interesting to hear about all the different platforms I hear a lot about Microsoft Teams and Slack but not quite so much about Workplace. At this point, I want to take a step back and

for anyone that's not familiar with online community management as a profession, can you give us an overview of what a community manager's role is?

Lauren Piro 05:04

I can. So I essentially, I guess you need to understand the definition for community. A community, at its most basic is just a specific group of people who've developed relationships around a common interest. This has existed since I guess people lived in caves, right? So communities have formed in physical spaces for a really long time. And it was one of the first things to start forming in digital spaces as well. So, right back in the early days of the Internet with things like Usenet, Yahoo Groups, those things were back around in the '90s and people coming together around common interests have always been a thing in digital spaces. So for some of us that have worked in online communities for a really long time, we started out with things like moderation of various, I mean, there is a community for literally everything. So I think some of us came from travel forums—I myself came from music-based forums—and some of us came to it through other areas. But for those who have an interest in online communities, before it became synonymous with social media, it did mean that sort of forum-based community where there was a dedicated space for people to just discuss one interest or form around a shared theme, rather than something like social media, where everyone has their own individual page, and you come to their page to interact. This was a group of people that go to a place to interact. So given that there are lots of people coming together, one of the analogies that we use a lot in describing community management is the analogy of a party host. So if you're hosting a party, at your house, or even hosting a party at a venue, you need someone there to act as that host capacity. So someone that greets the people as they come in, they show you where the toilets and the exits are, they make sure you have a slice of cake, they introduce you to other guests. And if there's anyone misbehaving they quietly escort them out, or at least pull them into line and be like, yeah, that's not what we're really doing here.

Maddie Duke 07:09

Yep.

Lauren Piro 07:11

So that is essentially a community manager's role, we're the party hosts, we're the person that makes sure that spaces are safe, that people are connecting because I guess at the heart of community is discussion and connection and relationships.

Maddie Duke 07:25

Awesome. I love that analogy. And I miss going to parties.

Lauren Piro 07:38

Don't we all! It feels like the idea of a party host is really of days gone by.

Maddie Duke 07:40

Yes! So, how does that come into... we've got kind of the idea of a community based on a shared interest, how does that translate to branded and owned communities, but then also about online employee communities within a remote workplace.

Lauren Piro 07:56

So with owned communities, they typically form around a shared interest. And that could be lots of different things. So there are more broadly speaking, five types of things that underpin a community. So it can be a community of practice, which is what you find in a lot of professional communities. So that might be a community of, say, accountants, for example, there are communities of place. So you'll see this a lot with Facebook Groups, often Facebook Groups pop up around suburbs. There's also around interest, which I think is what most people would be familiar with when you're talking about types of community. So, those are for, say, fans of the TV show Supernatural, or lovers of punk rock, or indoor plant enthusiasts, those communities of interest, I think, are the ones that people are most familiar with, particularly through, say, larger platforms like Reddit, where you can literally find any interest in the world, there'll be a community that for that, and you can have a community of action. So that might be things like climate change action, or activist communities, or even just people who consistently perform a similar action, they can go together and form around that. And finally, the other type of community is a community of circumstance. And that typically is what you would find people that through, I guess, choice or not, have found themselves in a similar circumstance. So you might be talking about health circumstances. So people living with cancer, people living with mental health conditions, or perhaps other circumstances that bring people together, whereas they might not have met before. So typically, when you're talking about a branded community, you might find say, nonprofit organizations branding their communities around circumstance or action. So you might also be looking at professional organizations that form communities of practice. So for example, if there was registered accountants, they might have a branded community of practice for them all to communicate. Pace and interest tend to be, sometimes they're branded, particularly if there's a sales aspect to it. So if you're looking at customers, and you want to market it to a specific area, or you want to sell a certain product that aligns with someone's interests, you might have a branded community there. But typically, they can also be member-run, so they spring up or more organically, I guess.

Maddie Duke 10:23

Right, so a branded community isn't exclusively a social media audience, but rather any space that allows people to come together and communicate about a shared relationship to that brand. Yeah, okay. So, I want to take a look specifically into the idea of an online community that is also a workplace. When we have a fully remote or even hybrid workplace, people work from home and access all their work and interactions through their computers, using these digital spaces, like Facebook Workplace, Microsoft Teams, and in effect, a remote workplace is an online community, right? Because you've got all these different employees engaging with one another, everyone's online, everyone's mainly using these tools instead of having an in-person, face to face interaction throughout the day. How does community management come into play here?

Lauren Piro 11:21

Okay, so look, if you go back to that definition of community as being a specific group of people developing relationships around a common interest, I mean, a workplace is already a community. You've got to a group of people, whether they're physically in one place, or distributed in different places, the common interest there is the place of work. So you already have a community whether your workplace is in a physical space, or whether it is fully remote and online, communities advice on relationships, so there will already be community forming in workplaces.

Maddie Duke 11:58

Is there such a thing as an Internal Community Manager for a workplace?

Lauren Piro 12:03

It is a thing. So it's, it's typically called either an Enterprise Community Manager or an Internal Community Manager. That is a role, it typically revolves around platform management. So you'll have an enterprise community manager, who looks after an intranet, for example, or some sort of central communication hub. And in reality, it really isn't that much different from managing an external or branded community. So I guess a lot of management, in a traditional sense, is about project management, so starting a project from A and ending at B, whereas an online community manager and enterprise community manager, they typically act like facilitators and coaches and connectors rather than project management. So it's not about completing a project and saying that it's done. It's an ongoing process of relationship management, sort of building the framework for people to connect.

Maddie Duke 13:04

What would you say makes a good community manager? What are the skills that a community or enterprise manager would need to have?

Lauren Piro 13:12

So I guess the foundational skills for community management, whether you're talking about a branded community or an internal enterprise community, is that you need to have that capacity to nurture relationships and maintain the space where they take place. So primarily, it involves a lot of listening. So you have to be listening to what your community is saying, or your staff are saying, your colleagues. And let that be sort of rather from the top-down, really listening and understanding and being able to expand from the middle out. It's also a lot about engaging in creating opportunities for engagement, creating opportunities for your team to connect with each other, which is not always, people won't always do that off their own back. So sometimes you need to have some spaces where people can just connect with some prompts rather than having to reach out individually all the time. There will always be an element of moderation, so reviewing what people have written, making sure it aligns with your organization's values, and it meets, I guess, professional standards for your particular community. That doesn't necessarily just mean removing all the swearing but, you know, it gives you an opportunity to weed out anything that's not directly relevant or create a separate space, because one of the challenges with working in a wholly distributed company is you don't have a lunchroom or a water cooler.

So there aren't those opportunities for people to just connect and get to know each other on a human to human level rather than a colleague to colleague level you know. So that tends to be what actually creates lasting community. So even in a community that is transactional, what we say is people come for the information but they stay for the relationships that they form, and part of that is really human connection. So being able to create a space for that online is really important if you're talking about a remote community, and I imagine it's one of the challenges for organizations that have gone from a physical office or a physical workspace to a fully remote or a digital workspace, because of COVID. It's a real difficulty in trying to create space for those non-work discussions to happen. And it's a really important part of online space that's not there about efficiency. You know, "we don't want people to be mucking around and DMing each other memes or jokes or, you know, calling out and making each other laugh". Those are the things that make a workplace culture work! So being able to convert that into online spaces is a challenge. But it's also a really important thing to do.

Maddie Duke 15:55

Absolutely. And I think you're right there that it's probably been quite a challenge for some workplaces to translate the in-person culture to an online space, particularly if they haven't had the chance to do it intentionally. One thing that I've heard a lot of workplaces are doing is to create an alternative to the watercooler chat. So keeping a chat open all day that anyone can join and say hello, or maybe a Slack channel to check in with everyone for non-work conversations. Do you think that's enough?

Lauren Piro 16:29

It's a good question. So I have actually seen what other organizations have been doing. And I think it comes down to one, the culture of your workplace to begin with and to the size of your workplace. So for a smaller organization, it's easier for things to develop organically just in a shared space. For larger organizations, I can say that there is value in creating structured space for that. So for example, in the last year, I've seen a lot of workplaces that have had to transition to being wholly online, do things like create quiz nights for each other, or something to replace the physical networking and events that they would have had. A place like Quip has never centered necessarily around in-person events, so that's not something we've had to replace in order to get people to connect with each other. But I can see that it absolutely would be for an organization that has a lot of employees. For us, just having the space alone is enough and to make sure that we're actively contributing to that space, and not just letting it wither away. So when you do have an online community building, and it's not enough, there's that movie, *The Field of Dreams*, where it's like, if you build it, they will come. That doesn't actually happen in online spaces, you can create a space, but if no one's going in there and using it, it just withers away and dies. I mean, the internet is literally a graveyard of failed communities. It takes constant online management to keep them going. And if you're in a management role, demonstrating the behaviour that you want, your community, your community members or your employees to follow it is really important. So getting in there and modelling the behaviour that you want. So if you want people to be connecting and sharing socially, make sure that you are either sharing yourself or that you're creating opportunities for people to jump in.

Maddie Duke 18:21

What do you think about when someone's maybe having a bad day? And usually, or let's not say usually, but maybe in an in-person office, you might walk in and you're looking a little bit sullen or a little down and someone might see it and notice and say "Hey, do you want to grab a coffee" and say, "Hey, how are you going?". What do you think that remote workplaces can do to fill in that space?

Lauren Piro 18:47

Yeah, that is definitely a challenge with remote teams. So as the textual communication increases there's a decrease in visual context and communication, and that does lead to things like being unable to read someone's body language or pick up on cues because I guess it's easier for people to disconnect to not be seen, it does get a little trickier to notice when they withdraw, or they're stressed. And for what reasons as well. You can tell in a physical workplace if someone is withdrawing because they're sick because they're probably at their desk sniffing and coughing rather than having a really bad day and being quite angry or frustrated. So that is definitely a challenge of having an online-based community for your workspace. One of the things that we have implemented for that reason is that we do pulse checks. So at the moment, we're using a platform called Lattice. We've used different ones in the past like 15Five, but we do pulse checks. So we asked our team to just check-in and answer a couple of really simple questions every week or if they don't work with us that frequently we may extend the timeframe but just to let us know: What's going right for you? What's going wrong? Give you a space to let us know if something's not going right, without necessarily having to engage a lot until we notice. And that just allows us to keep track of that team and make sure that no one's slipping through the cracks or going unnoticed. Because they haven't been engaging with others recently, it's sometimes the case that you're working on an individual project or you're really absorbed by something, and you don't interact with people, and it's there is literally nothing wrong so having those pulse checks really helps us work out if anyone is perhaps not feeling as connected to the team as they normally are.

Maddie Duke 20:40

Yep. And what about— I really want to ask as well about things like toxic workplace culture. So whether you're going into the office physically or you're online, there's always the opportunity and possibility that a culture will turn a little bit toxic. How do you manage an incident like that when you're dealing with a remote or distributed team?

Lauren Piro 21:04

I think some of that comes back to creating the culture that you want from the beginning and making sure that you're modelling that behaviour. And you're doing a little bit of internal moderation to make sure that the way people are expressing themselves is healthy and respectful of boundaries. Some of it also just comes down to making sure that you're hiring people that align with your values to begin with, because I feel like an organization's culture should align with its values. So, if you don't have that encoded in what your organization stands for, it's easier for toxic traits to creep in. One of the cool things about having an online workplace community is it increases transparency. There's not a lot of dark closets to go and.. bitch about

people in. A lot of communication is upfront, it's really visible. And if you foster a culture of openness and transparency, people feel more comfortable flagging when something inappropriate is happening, and also doing a bit of self-moderation of their behaviour. But one of the things that our CEO Allison Michalk introduced us to a couple of years ago now and that we've really taken to is the, I guess, the principle of "radical candor". So I guess if you're not familiar with radical candor, it is a method by [Kim Scott](#), who I think was formerly at Google, and has worked at various organizations, and she has some fantastic YouTube videos that explain it a lot better than what I'm about to. But basically, radical candor is the idea that feedback should be open, it should be kind, clear, specific, sincere, it should allow people to be human and not erase your sort of vulnerability and humanness with the veneer of, I guess, acting professionally. But it really functions on an axis that you can give people very direct, clear, challenging feedback, as long as you're able to demonstrate that you care personally for them. So I think she phrases it as caring personally while challenging directly, then it's this idea that you are open and able to give feedback both ways, both from I guess, management to employee or between colleagues on the same level, if and it's more easily accepted if you're able to demonstrate that the reason you give this feedback is that it will be acted on. And it's because that employee and their ideas are a valued part of your community or your organization. It is not something that you just commit to and then you're able to do perfectly all the time, you really have to think about it with every interaction that you have. And you don't always get it right, even though you know the framework. So she divides it into quadrants. And there are things like ruinous empathy, where you care a lot, and you don't actually then give the critical feedback that needs to happen in order for positive change to be created. So, yeah, we're all guilty of that one. It's where we're like, no, everything's great, you're doing a great job. And meanwhile, that person is actually really letting down the team in one certain area. And it's really difficult for people to give feedback. I feel like people say they're able to receive feedback, but they do find it challenging to give feedback. It's hard to give people hard truths about things, particularly when there's room for improvement, there's things they need to be doing better. So we do work to that, and it is definitely something that is a challenge for all of us to continue doing. I think we're all pretty kind, friendly people and it's really tough to let people know that, but at the same time I think, Quip particularly has been able to demonstrate that we do care about you individually. I mean, we have modeled this behaviour, we've made sure that we've got lots of things set up that show that there might be times where we give you some really hard feedback. But we're also demonstrating that we support you, and we're here to nurture your development and provide you opportunities and respect your boundaries. So being able to balance feedback and the respecting of boundaries, and showing that you care is the key to making sure that people don't just constantly feel like they're being picked on.

Maddie Duke 25:38

Yes, there's nothing like being told "this isn't good enough", but then, being given no assistance to work on that thing. Or as you say, not being told at all. Feedback can be hard to take, but it's so important, and it makes such a difference when it comes from a place of understanding and empathy.

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Maddie Duke 26:29

What would your advice be to people who are managing culture in a workplace that has shifted from an in-person space to an online or remote space?

Lauren Piro 26:37

So I think we saw this happen a lot over the past 12 months where there were a lot of workspaces that, by necessity had to transition into being exclusively online or partly online. And that was a challenge, not just on the technical side of needing to find ways of communicating with each other but needing to find ways to keep your workplace functioning and going and keeping people connected when it became online. So I think part of that is really needing to understand what your organization's values are, and how they are translated and through communications, and that needs to be across a range of communications. So for example, at Quiip one of our values is flexibility, so we make sure that in all the things that we do, it's flexible, and part of that means being open to asynchronous communication. In a workplace, often you have people standing side by side working together. Online, it becomes a little different. So you can't I guess physically typing side by side, there does need to be some adjustment to working asynchronously where perhaps someone responds, and a person doesn't necessarily respond immediately they take the time to go and work on that project and come back to it. So being able to adapt to working asynchronously is really important. Being able to ensure that your organization's values are embedded in whatever online space you start to use is really important. I guess after... post-COVID, I mean, there will still be a space for online workplace communities. Organizations that always have all employees inhabiting the same physical space at once. So they may have different stores, different offices, a warehouse versus head office, you may have contractors or consultants that come in and out, you may have people on flex time. So, if you look at online spaces, it can be a constancy, it can be a way to keep your community running. To keep your workplace going, having an online community as part of, or I guess enhancing your physical workspace community is can be a really useful thing to develop.

Maddie Duke 29:00

Great, I love that point you make about embedding your organizational values in whatever online space you're using. Because essentially, that's it right? In a physical office, you have a lot more indirect touchpoints that allow you to get a feel for what the office culture is like and bringing that online takes a bit more of a dedicated and conscious effort than it might seem. So in your role as Director of People and Culture at Quiip, a totally distributed team, what are your biggest challenges?

Lauren Piro 29:35

Look, I think one of the challenges is the need for constant management of teams. I guess, as I mentioned, if you're not actively managing a space, it can disappear really quickly. So part of that is not just creating stuff that's new and exciting, which is definitely the fun bit but then going back and making sure that the things that you've built are still functioning as you want them to, that people are still engaging the way that you want them to, that they still have that connection to the company and to each other. There are always going to be some unique challenges to working with a distributed team. But there are also lots of great things. I mean, it definitely breaks down silos. I know a lot of organizations tend to form little information silos around their department or their specific team, and they don't always collaborate really well. I think one of the awesome things about online communities and about being a people and culture person is you get to break down those boundaries and connect teams to each other, and that does amazing things for organizations. You get to harness brainpower and coach people to work with each other. And when those things happen, that's where innovation happens.

Maddie Duke 30:47

Do you think that it's important to be aware of different people's ways of working?

Lauren Piro 30:53

Absolutely. So literally, everyone has a different communication style, sometimes you can group them more broadly together. But also, in addition to having a communication style, people have a lot of communication preferences. Some people want email only, some people will communicate heavily via a direct message or some sort of Slack version. Some people love to get on phone calls, some people absolutely hate it, some people love to have their camera on during meetings, some don't. So it can... it's a bigger challenge, the bigger your organization gets. With a smaller organization, you tend to familiarize yourself with how your colleagues communicate. With a larger organization, you either have to create rules or boundaries around the way that people can communicate in order to keep things relatively consistent. Or alternatively, you put some sort of communication style survey out there so that you can understand that when someone sends you an email that's really just dot points, that they're not angry, or they're not communicating something different, other than that they just really like to absorb communication differently and dot points. And one of the things we're really mindful about as well, is that yeah, people don't always process information the same. Not everyone is neurotypical. And sometimes, people need extra cues. And sometimes they don't. We know that at Quiip we have people that process visual learning and videos differently to written, so we'll often provide both. So, if we're doing a video update for the team, or we're having a visual meeting, we'll accompany that with just basically a series of brief summary written notes about it. And making sure that whatever form of communication you choose is actually accessible as well. Because chances are, you have people with a variety of different needs in your team and making sure that information is accessible to people who process information differently is really important as well.

Maddie Duke 33:00

Yeah, I think that's a really important point to make. Accessibility is something that could do with more attention in all areas of business, I think. But internally is a really great point because remote work, and the increase in remote work jobs that are available, broadens opportunities for people with much more diverse needs and disabilities and accessibility requirements, but if workplaces aren't also doing their part then, in making the actual workplace accessible, then we're losing that opportunity.

Lauren Piro 33:31

Yeah, absolutely. Being able to work from your home opens up the potential for gainful employment for a lot of people who can't necessarily commute into the city every day or sit at a desk or read from a screen or, you know, there there are lots of different things that opens it up to parents that opens it up to carers that opens it up to people living with various disabilities, it is more accessible. But yeah, you're right, as part of that the workplace needs to be accessible in return, whether that means that you're open to different work hours, whether that means you're opening up different forms of communication. The more diverse your workplaces, the better. But you need to make sure that it's not inadvertently locking people out of being able to be part of your community.

Maddie Duke 34:21

Yeah. And I wanted to quickly say as well, just to go back to that way of different people communicating in different ways. And a bullet point email, not necessarily meaning someone is annoyed with you, is how much difference a full stop can make or an exclamation point, or a smiley, like, when you're dealing with so much written communication, those tiny things can can come packed with so much implication and as a community manager, you're probably very perceptive to those sorts of differences in the subtleties of punctuation and things like that, you know.

Lauren Piro 34:59

It's interesting because I feel like there is a different way of communicating in social media spaces as an individual, and sometimes that bleeds into, how do you communicate online in a professional setting? So I mean, we're in 2021, and it is completely okay to use emojis at work. And indicating some context of where this information is coming from, if it's light-hearted if it's serious, etc.

Maddie Duke 35:31

Definitely. Before we wrap up Lauren, are there any final thoughts or any final pieces of advice you have for businesses that are managing remote workplace cultures that might be struggling a little bit?

Lauren Piro 35:43

I've heard it said that the future of all management is community management. And I do feel like there are a lot of principles of community management that have great application for organisations, particularly organizations that do have some sort of distribution to their workforce.

I think it's really valuable to look into that further, if you're managing teams, if that is part of your responsibility and your role, and you're looking to connect your team, have a look at some of the principles of online community management, or even before that a lot of the academic principles of community come from physical communities from the '60s and '70s. So having a look at some of those principles of community management can be really beneficial to creating a workplace culture that actually works.

Maddie Duke 36:31

Awesome. Thank you. Well, Lauren, it's been awesome having you on *The State Of Work*. Thanks so much for joining us and sharing your insights.

Lauren Piro 36:39

Thanks so much for having me.

Maddie Duke 36:48

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Thanks for listening and see you next time on *The State Of Work*.

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