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with Barbara Best

Transcript: Remote Support in a Non-Profit Setting (interview)

Barbara: Hi I'm Barbara Best. I'm an expert in the field of remote administrative support, and our topic today is how remote support and growing teams happens in the context of a non-profit. My guest today is Monica Chohan, the co-Executive Director of Organizational Development at Dandelion Dance in Ottawa. Welcome Monica and thank you for joining me on this podcast.

Monica: Thanks so much for having me Barbara. I love talking to you about these things so I'm excited that you asked me to join you.

Barbara: Great, let's jump right in. So, Monica, tell me, how does remote support happen in your organization? What's going on today, how are you doing it?

Monica: So, there's a couple of different ways that we are engaging remote support for our organization. First off, we are an entirely virtual organization. We run programs for girls that support their leadership skills and wellbeing, here in Ottawa, and for those we run them at various locations throughout the city and we rent space to do that, but we don't have a brick and mortar location for an office.

So, what that means is we work virtually in almost everything that we do in terms of the operations, and the planning and the management of the organizations. And one thing that we're doing is we're growing. I made a decision quite some time ago that it didn't make sense for us to look to hire staff in certain functions, because our need for certain functions like, some financial support, or administrative support, customer support, social media, bookkeeping, those are things we only need a few hours of support in each month. And it also cycles a lot throughout the year. I'm a really big believer in hiring people that are really good at those kinds of functions, for those things.

You know if you outsource it, yes they are charging more per hour for a freelancer, or if there's somebody that's working as a virtual assistant, but you get better work, and you get better results and it's actually more cost effective and efficient for us overall.

So, we have a virtual assistant, that has now been with us for almost 2 years, and she does a range of work for us. She's our front facing customer service email management, and she does the responding to people who are interested in finding out more about our programs. She is the person who also takes care of our social media, so she does the posts, and she develops the strategy and she and I work on that together. Then she implements it. She is so good at so many different things that she is now working with us on some basic bookkeeping and functions that we, on a financial management end, need support with. All of that plus the administrative support. Even then, we are looking at 20-25 hours in a month for all those things because our organization isn't big enough to need more than that.

So, being able to find that virtual assistant was a godsend. It's perfect. And she's been able to grow with us. When she first started, we were doing 5-7 hours a month, because that's what we had the budget for. So we can grow it and there isn't that same kind of an obligation that you do have to somebody when they are an employee, and you do want to treat them well and you do need to treat them well, it's important to treat them well. But I'm not in a place where I can hire somebody that's just going to do the finances and have a need just for that. So, we have that remote support in the form of our virtual assistant and social media specialist and that's one person who does those two things really well. And as we grow, she's learning and taking on other things. And then we also have somebody that we contract to take care of our website and IT support and graphic design, and so she provides services in all three areas. And again, we are not big enough to have someone on staff that does only those things. And I think it's probably common for most organizations to contract out IT and website support and graphic design, but it's really on the virtual assistant side, where I think people are thinking about that more. Which is great. And it's so awesome that there are so many more people out there that are thinking about doing this as their own businesses.

Barbara: I've been doing this for 16 years and I've hit my stride. This is where I thrive in what I do. Yes, I manage a company of 12 service providers, but I started out doing what your virtual assistant does. And that's doing the whole back office thing. And I've come to realize that it's really, what I like to call, 'pure work'. In other words, you as the employer, you're paying only for the work that the support person provides. You're not paying for their vacation, you're not paying for their coffee breaks, you're not paying for lunch time and all this stuff. You're only paying for the services that you incur. So, it's very efficient and very cost effective.

So, I also want to know, Monica, from your perspective, are there any challenges that you've come across, hiring remote support? Not necessarily from a skills perspective, but from the perspective of being remote, is there any challenge with bringing on people remotely?

Monica: There are, and you know, the first thing is, I think a lot of people do feel like, well how do I know if I'm not seeing this person face to face? It's a general sort of thing. How do I know what they're really doing? And that's a trust question that you have to build over time.

Barbara: Absolutely.

Monica: I've worked in a lot of traditional office environments where there's people who look like there's doing a lot and they're not. And I think there's that kind of a concern that people might have at the forefront of their minds, but that's something I don't get too hung up on. For us it's just the more practical things, like, for example, as our virtual assistant is helping us to be able to manage a lot of our book keeping and she's supporting with management of files and things like that, we do still have to be able to meet. Or find some way to get paper records to her. There are certain things that we just still have to do by paper. Her home office is in a very different part of the city from my home office, and we also have very different types of schedules, and we're always balancing different obligations, so it just means it takes planning sometimes to do the simple things. Like, I can't just walk down the hall and hand something to her. It does take getting some systems and putting them in place so that those kinds of functions that are important, those certain of things that need to be done day to day, that you've got systems to take place of the usual way of walking down and putting it in somebody's inbox because you can't do that. But they're not insurmountable you just have to think about it. And then, the other thing is, where do we store everything, right? So, there's things that she and I have developed a system where there are certain kinds of files and certain kinds of things that I need as an executive director, and then there's things that she's keeping that are things I don't need, and frankly we're just going to pull them out once a year for our audit, and that's it.

Barbara: Absolutely.

Monica: Right? So, there's those systems for taking care of that. But it does mean that I have to know that that person has the available storage space in their home office, and I know they're managing a bunch of different clients. It sounds like such a mundane thing but it's a pretty big thing after a while. And there's always that technology is not always going to work in our favour. It's getting better, and better and better, but you know even up until 2 or 3 years ago, a Google Hangouts call, or Zoom, or whatever; it is so great to be able to do video conference. I absolutely love being able to do video conferences with people to be able to meet people in that way. You can share screens and all of that, but sometimes it doesn't work, and sometimes you do just have to get together face to face. There are certain kinds of things that you can't do that way. But again, I don't think these are insurmountable challenges, it's just a different way of working.

Barbara: Yeah, I agree. And if both parties are open to possibility, what can we do, how can we solve, whatever? If both parties are up for it, why not? It's more efficient to do it that way, for sure.

On that same vein, we talked earlier about growing teams by working with people's strengths, treating them well and being human. What's your take on that Monica, in a remote workspace? I know we have to work at it a little bit harder, because humans are wired to be face to face, but here in 2020 we've got all this great technology as you just mentioned, video conferencing and so on, what do you think about building teams in a remote workspace, what's your take on that?

Monica: You know what I think is really interesting about it is, I think that when people are able to work remotely, and especially when you start to look at certain functions in an organizations that you don't necessarily have to have in house, but you can outsource, you have an opportunity to then really and truly allow the people that are quote in quote, in house, focus more on what it is that they do best and what brings them to work every single day. We're all going to have to do things that we don't want to, like every single one of us has to do things they don't want to. But I really think that people are at their best when they feel. It sounds so obvious, but I don't think that people really think about this when they're going to university or people are in high school and you've got career counsellors, like what actually motivates you at that fundamental emotional level to get up every single day and show up and do your best at whatever it is that you are doing for work or an occupation or your career, your studying? I know from personal experience that there are a lot of things that I'm very good at, but that I don't find motivating. For example, to sit at a desk day in and day out and do work writing legal briefs. I have a background as a lawyer. That is not motivating for me. I like to be out. I like to be talking to people, I like to be working with people. I like to be doing things where you're building something, you're imagining possibilities and I love things that feel more creative than that. Not to knock legal work, I think it's really important work, and I feel stupid saying that, but it's not motivating for me to go into an office every day with just me and my research and my papers, and this memo that I'm drafting or whatever. So I had to really learn for myself what motivates me to get up and have energy in my work, and what I think is really cool, is that when I first met our virtual assistant that we use at Dandelion, she loves setting up systems, she loves organizing things.

Barbara: I can relate to that!

Monica: And I was in disbelief. And I am so grateful that I've got somebody so passionate about it, that that's her business. And this is what she's doing to support small organizations, or organizations that just don't need somebody that's going to be doing administrative work 40 hours a week because there just isn't enough of it. So, this is what's she passionate about.

So rather than going somewhere and working in a role where maybe she's, on paper fulltime, but maybe she also has to end up twiddling her thumbs for some of that time, because the truth is, they don't have enough work. She always shows up at her absolute best. And in working this way and as I'm able to grow Dandelion as an organization and we grow our budget, it gives me space to focus on the things that give me the most motivation, and that gets me the most excited about what I do best, and I do the

same for all of...like we definitely have staff. We have employees that actually deliver our programs, and in this process of realizing that we would be able to use remote workers and virtual assistants, it was like, okay so there's a lot of things that a lot of my teaching staff had to pull into their hours. What this means is that we've been able to transition a lot of that work to the virtual assistant, who loves helping us with it. And then they can focus more on the teaching, the community outreach, building partnerships, working with me on those things that are going to grow our impact. So, this is where being human to me is recognizing that people are motivated at an emotional level and there are people that love to do different things. And if there's different ways of building a team or being able to give work to people that break out of those traditional molds that I don't think recognize really the way that people truly work and operate at an emotional level. We should do that. We should work with how human beings are.

Barbara: I agree.

Monica: Not try to force them to work against their nature, their fundamental nature.

Barbara: I agree, absolutely. Especially in today's information economy, you know, there's a line there, or maybe not so much a line anymore, between technology and being human. I think we've evolved to sort of use technology to a human's advantage and we're just finding our way now. It's fascinating stuff. You mention, and one thing I love that you said when we talked earlier, you said "Keeping the best people means going beyond the 9-5 ass in seat mentality", which I think is just great. Can you elaborate on that, what do you mean exactly? I just love how you said that, what does that mean for you?

Monica: It is entirely possible in many work environments, to show up and look like you're there, but not really be there. It is totally possible to do that. I really am so much more interested in what people deliver on my team, than the amount of time that it took to get them there. That doesn't mean, look, my virtual assistant bills us by the hour, that is our arrangement.

Barbara: That is your thing.

Monica: But I genuinely, all I care about is you know that when I set a deadline or I say we need something, and she tells me if it's workable, or if it's not, what I care about is the result that I get from it, and is it amazing, does it meet my expectations, does it surpass them? That is what I really and truly care about, and when it comes to the people in our organizations that are employees, I very much treat it the same way.

Everyone is on a part time salary, and we've done that in recognition of the fact that the hourly model doesn't really work for our organization because we're growing and things are changing, and sometimes my staff need to go over a certain number of hours in a certain week, but other times they don't need to work that much. From an administrative perspective it is crazy to make people who are working to grow to build something and are very well educated, and have a set of very professional skills, for me to tell them you are working 10 hours or 12 hours or 16 hours in a week right now, and I expect you to be working from your home office between like 8-5 every single day of those days that you're working for Dandelion. That's not going to work. They're balancing this with other projects, they are professionals. These are not high school students, these are not even university students, these are women that are looking to build their career, working in girls' wellbeing, and they balance this with other work that actually makes them really damn good at the work they do for us.

So I recognize that sometimes that means they're taking on consulting gigs, sometimes their taking on a special project, sometimes they are doing things frankly outside of work where they need some support to balance with kids and family and we have a level of trust where we focus on setting deadlines, absolutely. Absolutely I ask them to track their hours, to see how things are working. Is the salary that we're offering a fair reflection of how much it is that you are putting into the job, like is there something

we need to adjust? But I really think that if they need to get something done between 9pm- midnight on a Tuesday night because they had to take their kids to the doctor because they're not well, that is okay. And I want to be able to support them. I don't want them to be working 9pm to midnight, but sometimes things happen. I do think that people have to be treated like adults and be given the flexibility to manage their lives in ways that really recognize again that we are human beings and the world just doesn't work that way anymore. It doesn't have to, so let's look past it.

Barbara: That's right, we're not punching time clocks, anymore right? Not now.

Monica: Exactly you know? And the other thing I think we really have to put an end to: this idea that everyone's brain is just on between the hours of 9-5.

Barbara: Truthfully.

Monica: I wake up a lot of days at 5:30 in the morning. I often have put in a half days work by the time that most people have gotten into their office, gotten their coffee and settled down. And that's because my brain is on, it's awake, it's on fire, and then I hit my desk slump at 2 o'clock, and if I can frankly go grocery shopping at that time, that is awesome. That is great.

Barbara: I agree, I do the same thing. Absolutely. Do you have any final words for us Monica? What do you want to say? What's going on, about this whole human thing?

Monica: I genuinely, I really think that any time if you're in a leadership position and you're finding it hard to let go of the idea that people should be able to manage their schedules to a greater extent, that people should be trusted to deliver on results, you've got something on your own end, probably, that needs to be worked out. I'm not saying that it isn't important to build that trust and know that you've got that trust in the team, but you know we resist change because we're afraid of something. We feel like we have to keep control somehow, and I think it's really worth looking at ourselves. If we're not willing to try to do things differently that just reflect the fact that we're all people. And if we're not willing to get with that, especially with the opportunities that technology does give us now. Like this isn't something that we just can't because you know, everybody has to do things on typewriters. This is not how we are anymore, so if you're not able to allow some more flexibility and allow people to balance their own...
barking in the background By the way, that's my dog. One of the other challenges of working virtually is that sometimes people have a tough time setting up a home office that's entirely peaceful. But whatever, I used to have annoying coworkers that worked down the hall, so this is trade-off, my furry little friend.

Barbara: But it's so real Monica, it's so human.

Monica: Absolutely, he's doing a good job of guarding the home office, that's what he's doing. But you know, I think that if people aren't willing to change and they have an opportunity to make those calls, wherever it is they're working, I think it's worth asking ourselves if we are leaders, and we are worried about trying something different, and what is it? And if it's genuinely that you're just not sure about the trust issue and you're just not sure; there's a fear around something like, there are so many opportunities to do things differently, and better and more efficiently and it's worth taking a bit of a leap of faith on it.

Barbara: Yeah, I agree.

Monica: Just try. Just try and I think you're going to have happier people working for you as well.

Barbara: More productive people for sure, cause they're probably in their environment, they're in their element doing what they do anyway, and that alone means they're going to be happier and more productive for their clients.

Monica: And build loyalty!

Barbara: Yeah! For sure. So, in closing, thank you Monica for your insights, it's been wonderful. Tell our listeners a little bit more about you, what you do, why you are and who you do it for, tell us about Dandelion dance.

Monica: So, Dandelion is an organization that was founded formally as a charity and non-profit back in 2012. It was founded by a woman named Hanna Beach, who has spent 20 years of her life building experiential programs for children and youth. She had developed a very specific kind of program for girls and young women from all walks of life, all abilities, all experience levels. And it's all about using movement, the body and the creative process for girls to be able to discover their own voices and put their own ideas out into the world. So, the program is not actually at all about technique.

I mean, they learn a lot of different techniques from our facilitators, but it's actually about discovering their own ideas and who they are and learning how to take creative risks and put something out into the world. So I really think of it as this beautiful balance between art making and you see these girls and young women just taking delight in realizing they've got capacity beyond what it is they're able to explore in their everyday lives in other ways. And I think there's something powerful when girls and young women also have opportunities to be able to move their bodies in different ways, and actually just stand up on a stage in front of an audience and be like This is who I am.

Especially in a culture where there is all this pressure to look a certain way, especially when you think of dance, right? The best part is that they all think of themselves truly as dancers. You know, being a ballet dancer, these are all beautiful artforms, but they all bring to mind a certain kind of body and a certain kind of standard of beauty. You know when our young women come together, and they support each other to create things and move their bodies and showcase their work to the community. And people are just so moved by it, like it really challenges the fundamental notion of who deserves to be seen and heard. Especially when it comes to girls and young women.

I've been working alongside the founder, Hanna to build up the organization. I do all the work on the development side, so everything from strategic planning to fundraising and communications and, cause I'm not the program expert but we work together hand in hand to build this, and she and I both balance it with other projects that we do. I do strategic planning and government consulting apart from that, but Dandelion it is my baby and I am so excited that it's 2020, it's 8 years later, it's here, I've been involved since 2016 and I cannot wait. I've got this sort of vision 2022 in my mind. The 10-year anniversary, and where will we be? So, we've got big plans.

Barbara: So empowering.

Monica: So, thank you for letting me talk about that.

Barbara: No problem. Just quickly, what's the website and your email address if people want to get in touch with you?

Monica: Absolutely, so our website is dandeliondance.ca. So dandelion, just the way that flower is spelled, and my email address is monica@dandeliondance.ca. And I would love to hear from any of your listeners.

Barbara: Thanks very much Monica, and a big thanks to you, dear audience, for listening to us and have a fantastic day.

Monica: Thank you so much and thank you for putting this out into the world and making people think about making better workplaces.

Barbara: Thanks Monica.

Monica: Thanks so much, Barbara.

(Note: since this interview was conducted, Dandelion Dance has closed its doors due to the pandemic)

There's a couple of action steps you can do:

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