

EE Podcast #67 Remote Teams

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Lea Alcantara: You are listening to the ExpressionEngine Podcast Episode #67 with special guest, Leslie Camacho here to talk about remote tEEmS. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host, Emily Lewis. This episode is sponsored by [Engine Summit](#). The online live Engine Summit covers the ins and outs of ExpressionEngine without the travel hassle of a traditional conference. It's like bringing the experts to your desktop. At the end of the Engine Summit, it's the popular EllisLab roundtable discussion hosted by our guest today, CEO of EllisLab, Leslie Camacho, talking about the state of EE and answering your questions. Sign up today and save 20% when using the discount code "EEPODCAST" enginesummit.com.

Emily Lewis: The ExpressionEngine Podcast would also like to thank [Pixel & Tonic](#) for being our major sponsor of the year. [Music ends] Hi Lea, how is life treating you these days?

Lea Alcantara: Pretty good. I'm always excited to have someone from EllisLab on the show.

Emily Lewis: Me too, and we haven't had a guest on the show in a few episodes.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: So today will be a nice change of pace. Since we are going to be talking about remote tEEmS today. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: I was curious, do you consider yourself a remote worker as a freelancer?

Lea Alcantara: When I was thinking about this topic, I didn't really think it applied to me directly since I'm a solo business. I do work remotely with people around the world, but not necessarily in a team environment or specific regular basis, then I realized, duh, this podcast. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: You and I are a distributed team that had to collaborate and work on a regular basis. Sometimes I think when we work online, it's easy to forget we are in completely different cities, let alone countries, though I think being in the same time zone helps.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] Yeah, that's true. I actually didn't even think that, how we manage the podcast, but yeah, we are a remote team. When I was thinking about the topic, I immediately connected with the remote worker title because I've been working remotely from my home office for about eight years now and six of those years were for my former employer, and then now, of course, I'm working for myself and I love working remotely. I have those [The Oatmeal](#) comic moments when I realize I haven't showered in a couple of days. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Or I haven't spoken to another human being, but I'm independent worker and I hated the distractions of working in an office. So I can't imagine working any differently.

Lea Alcantara: I totally agree. I do consider myself a remote worker too because even with local clients, I work from home as well, and I only do the occasional meeting which usually happens during the sales process or the final hand off or training. So sometimes it might as well be in another country, but working remotely as a freelancer or independent worker is totally different from remotely working with a virtual team.

Emily Lewis: Exactly, and that's why we are talking with [Leslie Camacho](#) today to get the bigger picture perspective on remote working. Les is the chief executive officer of [EllisLab](#) and he's been with the company for nine years, the CEO since late 2010. He's also one of the nicest people you will ever meet, and today he's going to talk to us about how he's running EllisLab as a virtual company and leading a team of almost 16 full time people remotely. Welcome Leslie.

Leslie Camacho: Hey good morning, guys.

Emily Lewis: How are you doing?

Leslie Camacho: I'm not doing bad. It started out as one of those oatmeal days for me as well.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] Nice, nice.

Leslie Camacho: My kid got me up at 4:45 AM.

Emily Lewis: Oh.

Leslie Camacho: And it's 9 AM where I am and I am already on hour five of being awake with two cups of coffee.

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Leslie Camacho: So it's that kind of day.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Crazy, crazy.

Emily Lewis: So when [we were talking with Lisa Wess](#), oh gosh, I can't even remember which episode number it was, but she was talking a lot about how you guys manage the communications with everyone working distributedly. Was it just the inherent nature of how EllisLab was from the beginning to be sort of a virtual company with remote workers, or was this a focus goal that you guys have been striving for?

Leslie Camacho: It was definitely just the nature of how EllisLab started. We never had the intention of growing the company remotely, but since that's how it started, that's how it naturally grew as well. It had pretty much started with Rick, because he's a wanderer, so he moves a lot on purpose and so when he started EllisLab, he was in Los Angeles and then he moved to Bend, Oregon and then later on to Hawaii and Florida, and so he jumps around a lot and I've done the same thing. I started out in Southern California. I went to Lincoln, Nebraska, out to Oregon and back to California and now I'm back in Oregon again, and so during...

Emily Lewis: And that's just been in a time you've been with EllisLab?

Leslie Camacho: Yeah, that's just been in the time I've been with EllisLab.

Lea Alcantara: Wow, crazy.

Leslie Camacho: And that's not true of everyone at the company, but once we had it started as a remote company, there is a certain lifestyle aspect to it that we really enjoyed and so we never made any real attempt to consolidate. We always talk about maybe we will move to the same location, but it never really panned out that way. With that said, Derek Jones, who is our CTO is a moving to Bend, Oregon where I live in a couple of weeks so I'm excited about having him on the same town as me so I'll get to see what the other side of the coin is like, at least for a while.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] Nice. So you sort of mentioned that the way you guys started, a sort of type of quality of life came with it. I know personally when I talk to other people about the fact that I've worked remotely for such a long time, they immediately think, "Oh, that's just must be great. You probably can do whatever you want. Work on your own schedule." And that all is true, but there are challenges. Are they even compounded when you are dealing with so many people on staff, and what kind of challenges is it are you dealing with?

Leslie Camacho: Yeah, all the pros of working remotely are also all the cons of working remotely as well with a few other ones.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So you can cite your schedule, but that means you have to set your own schedule.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] Yeah, right.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Leslie Camacho: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: You have to be responsible. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Leslie Camacho: Yeah, exactly. It's like, "Hey, look, I just watched three episodes of Survivor. Maybe I should have actually done some work."

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: You can fall into that trap so much more easily when you work remotely, and so then when you are actually running a distributed company, then you run into things like, "Well, how do I structure the company? How do I get people to report their hours? Do I even need to worry about that?" Because when you start individually, I mean, it was just Rick and I and Paul and it was just the three of us, it was really easy because you just have three people that knew exactly what they were supposed to do at all times and so that's when it was actually easy was when there were just three people because you didn't really need a new structure, you just needed a commitment to email and so we would go months without actually talking to each other even on the phone and Skype didn't really exist back in those days.

So when we went from three people to six people, that's when we really started feeling the challenges because you have a compounded challenge that any time you grow a company, you already have your own set of growing pains built in with doing that, and then when it's distributed, what happens is that the advice, especially five or six years ago, there was almost no business advice that translated directly to what we were trying to do and so that it made everything seemed harder than it actually was, but at the same time the rewards of doing that were also worth it. So nine years into it, we are beginning to feel like we've done something that's a little bit of uncommon, but we just wanted to share more of what we've done, especially our mistakes and successes, but the big challenges, how do you even do it when nothing actually translates in the way that you think it should.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees] That actually makes me curious because you said that the real challenges hit you guys when you doubled, you went from three to six. With those three new people you brought on board, did you have any way of assessing whether they could work in a virtual environment? Whether they were a good fit to add to this sort of company that really there wasn't a precedent for you to be referencing?

Leslie Camacho: We thought we did, and to some extent, we were right. But it's one of those things where you are doing something brand new to begin with.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so you have nobody at the company that's a trained business person. I'm the closest. I actually had a degree in marketing management or something like that back in the nineties when marketing meant being on a shelf and not being on the Web. But at least, there was a business degree there, but Rick is a sound engineer and no one else at the company had formal training so we were winging it on our own for a long time, and I think in our industry, what happens a lot is we have people that are so absolutely competent at producing and making things that there is this built in ego that takes place that I see it most closely in my doctor friends.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: Because they are good doctors, they think they are also good at computers or good at stereo systems.

Emily Lewis: Oh right.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Leslie Camacho: And so on the Web, “Man, I’m really good at HTML and CSS, so I must be really good at structuring a company.”

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] Yeah.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: If you say it out loud, it sounds to ridiculous, but when you are in the thick of it, you don’t even really think about it and so you have that natural growing pain where you have to really expand your skill set and you have to be humble but your success would be to not be humble and you don’t even realize it so you can end up making a lot of mistakes just accidentally not even knowing you are doing it. So when we went from three to six people, it was actually going from four to eight. That was the more challenging if I want to be specific to us, but doubling in size from four to eight, because it just exposed every single thing we were doing wrong in terms of how we worked together and then trying to figure that out remotely so we would read a business book or get business advice. I had businessmen friends and they would say, “Have you tried this technique or that technique?” And I’d go home and be really excited about implementing it and then we would sit down and I would think, “Well, I can’t actually do this because these eight people aren’t in the same room with me ever.”

Emily Lewis: Right.

Leslie Camacho: And so then that said, well, then what’s actually the theme or the spirit of this advice and how do we translate that into a distributed environment, and that turned out to be really challenging. Sometimes it would be easier, sometimes harder, but for the most part, it was harder simply because there wasn’t a template that we could follow.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So without that type of template, what were the steps you took to finally make that template to finally make that structure?

Leslie Camacho: I think the saving grace for us in terms of figuring out was we had two epiphanies as a company and then one thing that we always did right that turned out to be a lifesaver for us. The first one is that I forget which SXSW it was, but we were at a South By and I just overheard someone talking about Scrum and what Scrum was, and I ended up talking with him for I think almost 3-1/2 hours and so when we discovered that, we had a structure then that we could implement internally that was more than just what internally we called our previous way of working a “cowboy or artist” style that was really just haphazard. It resembled more of a roomful of freelancers doing their own stuff than a team working towards a specific goal.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So when we discovered Scrum, well, that makes it sounded like we invented it. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: When someone introduced us to Scrum and we implemented it, we had a structure then and just having a structure, any structure at all, solved a lot of our problems just be default.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And I know that Scrum is one of those things that people always have a love-hate relationships with it and we are no different in that sense, but I think the important thing wasn’t Scrum itself but that we had something

concrete that we could all sort of embrace as a starting point for how we work together. So why this was good from just a very practical level is simply that we now have a training method. So when we hired a developer, we could say this is how we work, and you could train them into that, "This is when we communicate, so make sure you do that. This is what's expected of you every few weeks and we got a system for doing that." So I don't think it was necessarily Scrum itself, but just having that ability to train it out, and where Scrum did lend itself well in other things is that Scrum has two aspects to it that really solved the problems we didn't even know we had and one of them was Scrum doesn't worry about tracking time in the traditional sense, so I don't worry about how many hours someone works in a day. I only worry about how many hours are left to have somebody complete it, so that took care of the time tracking problem for us in a very large sense, and the other thing was that it solved the communication problem because the one thing that we always did right was communicate.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: Internally, we've always have a commitment to making sure we are talking to each other and Lisa is especially good about keeping us honest about this. So if someone is not talking to someone else, then we know about it and we really had to reaffirm that commitment around eight people because when we went from four to eight, that got so chaotic. You would get a hundred emails a day just generated from these eight people.

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Leslie Camacho: And so if you have a structure, that solves a lot, that reduces the email volume without reducing the communication.

Emily Lewis: You mentioned that Scrum kind of pointed out these two things you didn't know you had a problem with, and that first one being the time tracking. So if you are not tracking time in a traditional sense, what are you doing? I guess, it sounds like you are tracking what's estimated to complete a given task.

Leslie Camacho: Yes, very much so. So the very basics of how Scrum works is that you will say like feature X will take 40 hours to complete, and it's a pure guess, and what Scrum does really well is that it doesn't matter whether it is 40 hours or 40 actual hours because it uses a relative measuring system. We could do a whole podcast about that, but for right now, let's just accept that the 40 hours don't necessarily have to translate into real hours. It's just a number that you measure your progress against.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so then as the person in charge of the company at the end of the day, I don't really care if my dev team has spent two hours working or twelve hours working, what I care is did the total number of hours drop.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: Did it go from 40 to 35 to 30, and you track that over two- or three-week time periods and so over time I can see then that my team is making progress towards this goal or we are going to ship late or we are going ship early and then have some downtime or some time to do a side project or something like that. So over the course of a year, you can look back and say that those 40 hours relatively speaking were fairly accurate or we weren't accurate so we need to adjust. So that's what I mean where it doesn't really matter what your schedule is like or whether you are reporting hours during the day because it's impossible to hide because every two weeks, was the work done or was it not done?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: If it's not done, then why? And since Scrum forces the communication and it's centered around shipping, if you are not working, it's going to be really obvious so time tracking becomes inconsequential.

Emily Lewis: So what about that communication part, how does Scrum help you manage that more effectively?

Leslie Camacho: Scrum helps us manage that more effectively by doing several things, and the most important thing for me as the CEO of the company and responsible for making sure the direction is strictly heading where I think it should be

heading, it helps me insert myself into their daily lives in a way that is non-disruptive to them. Scrum basically says that every two weeks, that's the most appropriate time for me to step in and say this is going well, this is not going well versus if I'm looking in a Git repo or I see an email or I hear a report, "Hey, is this not going well," then suddenly I pull the dev team out and I am talking to them. Now, they are distracted and then they've lost two days of development time.

Emily Lewis: It's disruptive.

Leslie Camacho: Right. So in the past, for example, when there were just three of us, if I saw something that Rick was working on that I had questions about, I would write him a small book and then he write a small book back, and then I would respond with a small book, and over time you would have these series of emails thousands of words long and they were happening every single day.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: Which is fine if it's two people because that's not actually as disruptive.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: But if you've got eight people and then 16 people, you just can't write 16 small books in a day and then if you do, then you've disrupted 16 people instead of just one and you've actually slowed down production significantly.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so what Scrum does is it says as the CEO or as – Scrum uses the term stakeholder – so if you have a stake in the outcome of a features add or a support renovation or something like that then at the two-week review, that's when you give that small book input and you give it in real time so that you can have those discussions back and forth. So now instead of writing, when I see something I don't like or something I do like that I want to replicate, I'll take notes to myself and just tag it for the next sprint review and say it because that has everyone at the company present and you can just take care a lot of that in real time. So for me as the person running the shop, that makes it much, much easier and then I'm out of their hair, I'm not micromanaging. They are free to do what they do best.

Lea Alcantara: So I just want to focus on the nitty gritty specifics about the communication. So you mentioned emails and then how Scrum helped reduced the amount of emails simply because you have better structure and better communication, however with 16 team members full time, I don't necessarily – well, this maybe my assumption – wondering if email is the best form of communication to get your points across to get the communication to happen. What kind of tools does your team use in order to effectively communicate to each other.

Leslie Camacho: That's an excellent question, and Lisa Wess is actually working up an article for the EllisLab blog that will go into a little bit of detail about what we are doing in that, and I think that's going up this week. But basically, it starts with the structure and so the tools that you use should be reflective of the structure that you have so the counterpoint to the two-week, or it's not the counter but the other side of the two-week reviews that we use is that we have daily stand-ups and these are real time, in-person meetings with that are per teams, so they are not companywide. So the dev team will have us stand-ups. The support team will have a standup. The executive team has a standup, and these stand-ups are limited to 15 minutes and you are just answering three questions; what did I do yesterday, what am I doing today, and are there any obstacles or things in my way, and you just talk those out really quickly between the people on your team and that sort of sets the context for all the rest of the communication for the rest of the day.

Emily Lewis: Is this in a video conference? Is that how it's face to face?

Leslie Camacho: No, we don't actually do video conferencing that often. I would like to, but the big problem with video conferencing is that once you get more than two or three people, inevitably someone doesn't have the bandwidth to support that. Where I am, I'm limited to 5 Meg upload speed, which I hate significantly.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: And then you have someone like my friend Aaron who lives in Chattanooga that they got full on fiber and they got some ridiculous 100 up and 100 down speeds.

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Leslie Camacho: And then you have someone that might be on the road and they are calling in from the 3G, so video conferencing becomes a big challenge. So for the stand-ups, we use a Mac software program called Sococo, and it's sort of like a virtual office setting and the program itself isn't really that great, but what it does is it creates this sort of video game style space, and I use that term very loosely, and so you can all see yourselves around the conference table, for example with little icons. It's sort of like a really simplified version of Second Life or something like that.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And it does two things well. It makes it easy to do to get everyone in the same room talking in real time and it makes screen sharing really easy. So that's how we handle the stand-ups on a regular basis is using that.

Emily Lewis: And is that the way you also use for the two-week reviews?

Leslie Camacho: For the two-week reviews, we use GoToMeeting.

Emily Lewis: Oh, okay.

Leslie Camacho: And the reason we use GoToMeeting is that Sococo works really well if you have less than eight people, but once you get over eight people, Sococo uses peer-to-peer connections and so again if there is a weak link in the bandwidth chain, then the whole thing falls apart.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And GoToMeeting doesn't do that. So with GoToMeeting, it's easy to get 16 people in there, and if we do any video conferencing, it's usually in GoToMeeting where three or four of us will turn our cameras on and just be goof off for being at the meeting.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: So yeah, for the two-week meetings, we use GoToMeeting. It turned out to be the best way for us to do that and for the daily stand-ups, it's Sococo, and then the rest of the day is a combination of email and IM, and for IM, we use a program called HipChat, but just about any IM tool out there will do the trick.

Lea Alcantara: You still mentioned email. You don't use any project management system like Basecamp at all?

Leslie Camacho: Yes, we do. So if you will notice there, when you run a distributed company, there is a whole set of tools that you have to use and these are all – oh man, this term makes me sound old.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: But we McGyver it. That's one of the things how we distribute.

Lea Alcantara: Oh okay.

Leslie Camacho: There is no single package for distributed teams that will meet all these needs. So for a project management, the dev team will use a program called Pivotal Tracker.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And that sort of like Basecamp for Scrum. It's really easy to set up projects in a Scrum-style format that's fairly simplified and that everyone can see and share, and then we also use Basecamp internally as well. So one of the things we discovered about Scrum is that it's really good for teams that are working on specific projects, but Scrum

really doesn't translate that well if your job is reactionary or it has to be changed on a regular basis. So for the support team, for example, we tried running support team in Scrum for a while and that just didn't work because their job changes every ten minutes it seems and so they needed a different set of tools in the way working for them. So we use Basecamp for a lot of internal projects as well as when we work with third parties, and mostly we chose Basecamp for third parties because everyone knows Basecamp at this point.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So if you are inviting someone with Basecamp, there is a good familiarity with the tool set already.

Emily Lewis: For these daily stand-ups and the two-week reviews, are they scheduled and they are at the same time every day or every week?

Leslie Camacho: Yes, all of that is set in advance, and that is critical because we across I think four time zones.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so once we found the time that everyone can meet, we needed to lock that in.

Emily Lewis: Does that take forever?

Leslie Camacho: It does.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: That's really between Lisa and Wes Baker. The two of them work really hard to make sure that we can schedule those companywide meetings. So we actually have one today. That's my next meeting today that I have. It starts at 11 AM Pacific my time and usually it goes about two hours.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: But that's everyone together, and the daily stand-ups are also scheduled per team. So each team determines its own standup time whenever it's convenient for them to meet.

Lea Alcantara: So is there like a structured way you deal with time zones, or is everyone just meant to understand what zone they are in and what zone you are in and what zone somebody else is in?

Leslie Camacho: Yes, it's more of the second. The support team is really the only team that has to worry about time zones on a consistent basis.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And that's because they have to make sure that all our support hours are covered. We've really changed support a ton in the last year and we are going to change it again a ton this year, but the basic premise is that the support team has to cover business hours in specific time and so then they have to arrange their schedules according to that and sometimes that can take some doing but typically it's not too much of a problem.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: We've talked a little bit about the specifics of the tools you are using for communication. I'm just curious, I mean, it sounds like having the structure in place is sort of the essential part of it, but how long did it take for everyone to sort of fall into this and work like a team with everyone following these new structures, or is it still something you are working out, evaluating and fine tuning?

Leslie Camacho: So here is the thing about structure and communication, every solution eventually becomes its own problem.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: And that is just something, I think this is true with non-distributed teams as well, but like for example, we were so in love with Scrum for about a year and then we started having problems because of Scrum. So communication is the same way, you communicate a certain way over a certain time period because you are solving a previous problem, but inevitably the solutions you bring in create its own set of problems. So with both structure and communication, it's really important that you review how it's going on a consistent basis so that you can figure out if it's still working for you, if it needs to evolve and change. Just like week, Wes came to me and said, "The development team is not liking the way this part of how we work is going. Can we change it?" And my answer is, "Yeah, absolutely. You have to. You know that much better than I do."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so they went and they made changes and the support team does the same thing with Kevin and the executive team does the same thing. What I stressed to my team at the beginning of this year that I really discovered after my first year of being CEO is that it's always important to be forward thinking with communication and structure and adhere to a system, but you can't be married to it in the sense that you can't be rigid about its implementation.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: The only thing that you have to be consistent on is your commitment to each other.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so when you talked about have we always felt like a team, yes. Even when some parts were dysfunctional or this was happening, if you are hiring process is right and you have a company culture that brings you together, then you can fail consistently and recover consistently because it's not the structure that makes the company. It's not the tools that you use to communicate that make the company, but it's the people and so it's your commitment to the people that you work with that gets you through any particular change, and we've been very fortunate in that regard.

Emily Lewis: Is there anything you guys do as a company to sort of keep that sense of commitment to each other and camaraderie going when you are distributed? I mean, that maybe isn't tied to your daily stand-ups or a project or a task, but just the essentials of who you are as people in the company.

Leslie Camacho: There is no one single thing that we do, but lately we've been trying to do things for that more intentionally than we have in the past. There was a threshold that we passed. When we went from somewhere along the time between going from 10 or 12 people to 16 people, that became something that we had to be more intentional about. It didn't exist that much when we had less than 12 employees because I think when you have less than 12, it's still really easy to get to know people just as you go about your daily work life.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: But now with 16 people, we have to be a lot more intentional about getting to know people. So like specifically, it turns out that a lot of us like board games.

Lea Alcantara: Nice.

Leslie Camacho: Especially on the dev team and the executive teams, so sometimes you can go into Sococo and you will see Wes and James in the courtyard and they are playing an online game of some sort that's based off of a board game or we will sometimes play Ticket To Ride on the iPad together.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: Almost every sprint review starts and ends with the discussion about a good board game, coffee, beer.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: But a lot of that is just an intentional reaching out to say, “Hey, how is your day going?” And that’s why the daily stand-ups help so much is because you get a sort of a feel for people’s lives. Like so much about being a distributed company, it’s easy and hard at the same time because when you work remotely, there is such a strong confluence of what happens in your personal life and professional life that bleeds together that I don’t think happens in a physical office.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So like for example, when we report obstacles, I will actually say, “My kid woke me up at 4 AM. I’ve been working five hours already. That means this afternoon I’m going to be bummed. So please if you have something critical, send it to me in the next couple of hours because I know this afternoon, I’m going to be shot.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And I don’t think that you would. I don’t have a lot of experience working in a physical office, so maybe it’s that way too, but we know we ended up knowing a lot more about each other’s personal lives than I think it is more than typical simply because of what you have to communicate because you are working from home most of the time, and so we get to know each other in those ways. We know who is selling their house, who is moving, who is renting, whatever problems may come up that I don’t think would normally come up as part of work versus what might normally come up over like if the three of us go out to lunch. We all work in the same office and we go out to lunch. I think we have those conversations, but those conversations in a distributed team come up during the actual work versus time set aside for it.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: That sort of blurring of the work life line. Has it been a challenge to draw the line when the end of the work day is, or making sure that, for example, if you have kids at home that they are not able to come into the office or your working space for a set number of time. Just sort of drawing a line from your personal perspective and then what you see your staff doing.

Leslie Camacho: Yes, working from home was a lot easier before our kids.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: There is no... [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Isn’t everything easier? [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: Yes, yes, that is true. That is a good point. For me, what happens is that the people who work best remotely and that you tend to hire tend to be workaholics.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so the hardest part is just stopping work, especially when you work from a laptop, 5 o’clock rolls around and you shut the laptop off and you go and eat dinner, but then at 7, you are like, “Oh man, maybe Derek emailed me back.”

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So you pop it open, and now it’s even worse with smart phones and tablets because your Plane Ticket To Ride and then you think, “Oh, you know, well, I could just go and check to see if Kevin got back to me on that draft.” And so I had to make a really conscious effort just to stop work at a certain time unless I’ve worked it out with my wife in advance. And for a number of years, I really avoided having a separate office, but when we were looking for a house most recently, we made a conscious decision to only get a house that had an office separate from the house. So we found a house that had a small garage and so I converted the garage into a home office and that’s the first time I’ve actually worked out of the house in a sense consistently and that’s been very helpful just to have a separate space where I’m still at

home, but it's a lot easier to not have people wandering and disrupt my day and it also makes it easier for me to leave work. So there is definitely a discipline that you have to get into and you just have to acknowledge that you are not going to be able to separate them and instead you have to find a way to make them work together.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And probably a really good example of this is if I leave work stressed and I don't talk to my wife about it, then I carry that stress into the rest of my family.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so I will be physically present with my family, but mentally I'm still working out some issue or solving some problem and that's not fair to them. So we actually have a routine that we go to. When I have stopped work, I talk about my day. I have to actually talk and engage and sometimes she says, "No, you just need to go and play your Xbox for 40 minutes until you left work behind and then come upstairs and you will be here."

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: So you have to find that routine that's going to be specific to you and your significant other and your kids so that you can be fully present for them.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And I know that sounds like a lot of work, but there is also the pro to this. The pro to this is that every single hour, like yesterday, I really didn't want to work. I have this boatload of stuff, especially with writing. I was having some writer's block and it would have been easy to avoid that, but all I will have to do is look out at my office window and I'll see my kids playing in the yard and I said, "Oh, that's why I'm doing this."

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: You need that reminder, and when you work at home, assuming your home life is good, of course. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: Then it's a really simple snap back reminder. It's like, "Oh yes, that's a huge reason for me to do this. Ultimately, this is the way I feed my family." Even if I love my job and even if I love my community and even if I love what I do professionally, there is always that greater need that I'm answering to and being so close to that is a huge motivator, and so it sort of drowns out all the cons that have to go, that go along with figuring out these details and so what I try to do with EllisLab is I really try to communicate that so that after the honeymoon period is over for remote working, because there is a honeymoon period where it seems like the best thing ever in this job.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: You have to have this reminder that we do this because there is something greater than ourselves that we are trying to accomplish, and so then I always tie that back. It also means that everyone who uses ExpressionEngine or CodeIgniter or MojoMotor or is thinking about doing it, they all have families. They all need to put a roof over their heads and what I'm doing right now impacts their ability to do that just like it impacts my ability to do that. As far as the cultural perspective at EllisLab, that is something that we drive home from the moment we hire. We are a family-oriented company. We are a people-oriented company and we take that aspect of being distributed really seriously in terms of reminding why is it that we go through all the pains to do this.

Lea Alcantara: That is a lot of information for this podcast.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: I do have a couple of more questions before we end it, more business related, practical stuff.

Leslie Camacho: Okay.

Lea Alcantara: Are there any legal considerations for a virtual company that you have to think about when you are hiring within your own city? I'm sure you just deal with your municipal and state laws, but when people are in different time zones, is there anything that you need to consider?

Leslie Camacho: Yes.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: Yes, this is, and unfortunately for me, Rick Ellis, the owner of EllisLab, has done a tremendous amount of work for years figuring that stuff out. So I will tell you just quickly the two most important things that you need to consider with a distributed team are the IRS and healthcare.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So because we are really serious about being good to people and a family sort of setting company that has to start with your employees and that means that we have to have healthcare for our employees.

Emily Lewis: Yehey! [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: [Laughs] Yeah, exactly. We didn't want to skimp on that. Now, the problem is that healthcare does not acknowledge the existence of distributed companies at all.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Leslie Camacho: And so we have switched to healthcare, I think we've switched it like six times in eight years.

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Leslie Camacho: And we just switched it again hopefully for the last time since it has caught up a lot, but what happens is that every state has their own healthcare laws and then there is a federal healthcare mandate as well, and so for example, in the state of Oregon, for a long time there was a required ratio that if you have less than 50 employees, you had to have at least 50% of them in the state of Oregon, and so for a while we had four people who lives in Oregon and then Rick moved and then I moved and then suddenly we were out of that ratio and that put healthcare in jeopardy for everyone else and then it's actually finding a healthcare provider that will allow you to have someone in a different state, and so that whole thing is a big headache. But fortunately, it's a lot easier now than it was four years ago, but it is still taxing to find a plan that will accept you if you are less than a staff of 50 or better yet even a 100 and actually give you a real healthcare where it's not just this weird sort of coupon-based healthcare.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So that's going to be a big struggle in figuring that out. And the second part is about hiring. The challenging thing about hiring is there is a tax component, but accountant, if you have a good accountant, that's really easy, but then what took us by surprise in hiring is how difficult it is to hire internationally if you want to stay by US laws.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: So for example, if we wanted to hire someone in the UK or any of the...

Emily Lewis: Canada?

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Leslie Camacho: Let's say, Canada, for example, you really can't do it unless you hire them as a contractor, but if you hire them as a contractor, there is a whole set of laws where you basically have to prove that they are contractor, and by the time you've proven that they are contractor, chances are the work that they will be doing for you won't resemble the work you actually need them to do.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Leslie Camacho: [Laughs] And so it creates this weird aspect because if you hire someone as a contractor in Canada and their job and the practical work that they do is the exact same thing as someone in the United States, then the IRS can come in and say, "Why didn't you hire someone in the United States because you are not paying taxes on this Canadian guy and he's really an employee." Then you put yourself in jeopardy for HR laws because you have to prove that you couldn't find the talent in the United States starting with your hometown and then the United States in general, and so if you are hiring, like in our case we are hiring a PHP developer and you say, "Well, I couldn't find one in the United States." That's really easy to disprove, and so then if you actually want to hire someone in Canada or the UK, then you have to actually establish physical office there and you have to pay taxes in those countries separate from the US taxes.

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Leslie Camacho: And so by the time you do that, if you are just trying to hire one off in Canada and one off in the UK, one off in Ireland, one off in Norway, it makes it really, really difficult especially since we are not project based in the same way that a web agency might be.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: Those are the two biggest legal considerations that you really want to get professional help on.

Lea Alcantara: Interesting, because don't you have support people in Europe?

Leslie Camacho: We used to, but we don't anymore at this time.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, okay.

Leslie Camacho: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Leslie Camacho: Although that was partly due to HR laws and partly because we really need full time people.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Leslie Camacho: And so those things went together. Eventually, I would like to hire full time support outside the United States, and this is a case where we can make a legitimate case and could make an argument because again that HR law.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Leslie Camacho: We could say, "Yeah, if we want to cover someone in the European time zone, we need someone in Europe to actually do that.

Lea Alcantara: Of course, yeah.

Leslie Camacho: And so there are other complications, but at least that's a lot different than trying to hire for the development team or the creative team or things like that.

Lea Alcantara: Okay. Well, I think that's all the time we have for today.

Emily Lewis: Les, before we end the podcast today, if any of our listeners wanted to follow up with you, how can they reach you online?

Leslie Camacho: The best way to follow along is my Twitter account which is [@knight777](#) like the medieval knight. I haven't been that active online recently. It's on purpose. I've been taking a break from social media because we've got a lot of internal projects at EllisLab that I've been focusing my time on, but definitely follow the Twitter account because I'll be back on there probably in the next month and being a lot more active there, and of course, you are always welcome to email me. It's just leslie.camacho@ellislab.com. I read everything and most of the time I can still respond to everything as well.

Emily Lewis: Excellent. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today, Les.

Leslie Camacho: Yeah, you are very welcome. I always love coming on here and hopefully it won't be that long until we are on again.

Lea Alcantara: It sounds good. [Music] Now, we would like to thank our sponsors for this podcast, [Engine Summit](#) and [Pixel & Tonic](#).

Emily Lewis: We would also like to thank our partners, [EllisLab](#), [EngineHosting](#) and [Devot:ee](#).

Lea Alcantara: Also, thanks to our listeners for tuning in. If you want to know more about the podcast, make sure you follow us on Twitter [@eepodcast](#) or visit our website, ee-podcast.com.

Emily Lewis: And don't forget to tune in to our next episode when we will talk about DRY techniques in EE with John Rogerson. Be sure to check out our schedule on our site at ee-podcast.com/schedule for more upcoming topics.

Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara.

Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis.

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for the ExpressionEngine Podcast. See you next time.

Emily Lewis: Cheers.

[Music stops]