



The Deloitte On Cloud Podcast

Title: Himanshu Varshney on how to build an excellent software engineering culture

Description: In this Knowledge Short episode, Himanshu Varshney talks about how to build a strong software engineering culture. He lists the guiding principles his leadership team has developed and discusses keys to successful implementation. He also warns about crucial pitfalls to avoid. One universal theme throughout, however, is that a successful culture starts with leadership's continued commitment to excellence and employee satisfaction.

Duration: 00:22:01

Himanshu Varshney:

Welcome to a journey where collaboration, innovation, and a shared sense of purpose come together. Imagine being part of a team where these elements thrive. This is the essence of a strong software engineering culture, and today we are delving deep into the world of building and sustaining a software engineering culture. I'll use S-W-E, or "SWE," for software engineering the rest of the conversation.

I'm your host, Himanshu Varshney, Managing Director at HashedIn by Deloitte, the CEO of HashedIn prior to acquisition. I am connecting with you from Bangalore, also known as the Silicon Valley of India. Before we dive, let me share a bit about myself. I'm a sports lover, a proud father of two lovely twin daughters, an engineer at heart, known for cracking poor jokes and my colleagues often call me a people person.

My journey began when I graduated from IIT Guwahati back in 2003. I started my professional career at Trilogy, a software company headquartered in Austin. In 2010, I co-founded HashedIn. Our journey took an exciting turn on first January, 2021, almost three years back when we were acquired by Deloitte. This marked the beginning of a new chapter where we aim to create more significant and meaningful impact for our clients. Since acquisition, we have witnessed exponential growth, quadrupling our headcount and delighting our clients with exceptional deliveries through a broad-based model.

What makes HashedIn unique is our strong commitment to creating an outstanding workplace culture. Since 2017, which is for the last consecutive six years, we have been consistently recognized as a great place to work and ranked in the top 25 India's best companies in the IT sector by GPTW India. Adding to our achievement this year, which was 2023, HashedIn was recognized one of the top 25 companies to work for in India, and this is across all sectors, not just IT services. Many have wondered how we cultivated such a culture and passion, and I'll share some of the key elements that have contributed to our success, so let's get started.

So what exactly is SWE culture? It's a set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that guide how we work together as a team in the software development world. Think of it as a DNA that shapes your work environment. A strong SWE culture is the secret sauce behind high-performing teams and successful organizations. It sets the tone for collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement.

At HashedIn, we follow four guiding principles that define our SWE culture. The first one is, "exhibit extreme ownership and deliver client delight." So, what that means is we have committed to creating an environment where we are not just task doers but also the thinkers and the owners. Each of these uses unwavering commitment to extreme ownership, strengthen the team, and translate into superior deliverables for our clients as we firmly believe that their success is our success.

The second one is, "learn and share." We have nurtured a culture of continuous learning where acquiring knowledge is just the beginning. We actively foster an environment where sharing knowledge with our colleagues is equally vital. Our innovative training bootcamps, known as HashedIn University, HU,

exemplify this principle. They challenge our new hires to collaboratively tackle real-world challenges in condensed timelines. Bootcamp success criteria are to provide a comprehensive exposure to various facets of full-stack engineering, instilling the confidence that Hashers can find solution to any challenge. In essence, it's about transforming the belief that impossible is actually "I'm possible."

The third one is, "embrace radical honesty and our fail-fast mentality." We cultivate an open and transparent environment, fostering a product development mindset where we focus not only on our strength but also help out our team members develop. We openly discuss our failures and believe in sometimes celebrating them as a possibilities for growth. Our motto is fail fast, learn fast, move fast. As part of HashedIn University, HU, bootcamp, we also have a project track here that is a team of three or four developers which are given a one-pager about a business problem they need to solve by building an end-to-end tech solution in just four weeks, the full working hosted or the cloud.

Over the past few years, we have successfully built hundreds of products through this. While only a few of them have reached the market, one was actually acquired by a prominent in-memory database company prior to the acquisition. We take pride in learning from the failures. These setbacks not only drive iterative improvements, but also encourage innovation at a rapid pace.

And the fourth and the last one is, "fun." Foster teamwork and community. We firmly believe in making the journey enjoyable. Fun isn't just confined to occasional parties. It's about creating an environment that end users can pursue their passions. While many companies talk about fun, we have elevated it to a fourth pillar of work culture, and it has proven to be a powerful force in shaping our identity across the organization.

So these four guiding principles: exhibit extreme ownership and deliver client delight; the second one, learn and share; the third one, embrace radical honesty and a fail fast mentality; and the fourth one, fun, aren't just words on whiteboards or walls. They are our DNA and form the very essence of our decision-making discussions, reward and compensation system, performance evaluation, transformative HU experience, and all others.

So how do you go about building this culture? You've established your guiding principles, the DNA of your organization. What's the next step? It all begins at the top with leadership. They must lead from the front, exemplifying the values they want their teams to adopt. These values should also be communicated clearly and consistently through the organization. Teams should be encouraged to freely share ideas, voice concerns, and provide feedback.

One compelling example, and one that truly signifies our fun principle, revolves around creating sports communities with a passion. We used to host events like Wednesday night soccer, Friday morning cricket. In the early days, I personally made it a point to participate in all events every week alongside with other senior leaders. This not only cultivated a sense of belonging, but also helped in building communities with our organization, all while having fun with a purpose. These gatherings fostered stronger bonds among Hashers and created an open environment for communication.

During the initial phase, extra effort may be required to establish and nurture these strengths. However, as time goes on, it becomes akin to developing herd immunity. The key is to persist in your efforts and guiding principles. It's this collective passion that will be the driving force behind how your organization, no matter how large, perceives and expresses its culture.

Sustaining a SWE culture over time is where the real challenge lies. As organizations grow, maintaining the same level of cohesion and shared values can become increasingly complex. So how you do it. Consistency is the key. Leaders must consistently uphold the culture they have established. This means integrating culture in every decision-making process from hiring, to training, to performance evaluation, to project management. Sometimes it even requires making tough calls to uphold your guiding principle.

For example, in 2019, we faced challenges working with a client who imposed unreasonable demands on our team. What made the situation even more challenging was that this expectation applied only to our team, not to their employees. Despite our best efforts to find a resolution, including discussions and considering increased capacity, we had to part ways with the client to prioritize our team's wellbeing. While it impacted short-term revenue, this decision reinforced our commitment to our guiding principle of fun and the importance of valuing our team over mere resources.

Another example that comes to my mind pertains to the provision of home-cooked food at our office. From Day 1, we have offered in-house cooking with all the full meals on the house. The question always loomed; would we sustain this as we scale up. It was a concern when we were just ten people and continued as we reached 100, 250, and beyond. Today we have a cafeteria designed to cater to over 2,000-plus Hashers.

The key takeaway here is that we addressed one of our Hashers' basic needs right from Day 1, and we have continued to do so regardless of the scale we have achieved. The point is that the challenges will always arise, but we have consistently harnessed the power of our guiding principles and the creative thinking of Hashers to find solutions and overcome these challenges. Additionally, feedback mechanisms should be firmly in place, allowing employees to voice concerns and suggest improvements. Regular check-in surveys, retrospectives, serve as invaluable tools for identifying and addressing issues before the escalate.

But why go through all this trouble? What's the impact of a robust SWE culture on the actual development process? Well, it's massive. A healthy culture leads to increased productivity, better collaboration, and faster innovation. When teams share a common set of values and trust each other, they can focus on solving complex problems instead of dealing with interpersonal conflicts. Companies that prioritize culture often find their employees more engaged and motivated, resulting in better software products and ultimately satisfied clients. On the business side, we have experienced substantial growth with our headcount quadrupling since acquisition. We have also ventured into new capabilities to serve a broader range of clients.

Let me share the example of our media and entertainment capabilities to illustrate the impact our culture has on software development. We began this capability from scratch almost a year back, cultivating talent and skill sets in an area where we were initially lacking. To get started this initiative, we assembled a small team of ten Hashers and challenged them to grow this capability. What they did next was nothing short of remarkable. They came up with a creative idea that blended fun with the development of accelerators. Transforming part of our cafeteria into a makeshift sports arena, they organized an environment akin to IPL, Indian Premier League.

They executed a media-based solution to live stream the event, with commentary, replays, multiple feeds, even ads as fillers. This initiative not only fostered competitive fun and team bonding but also allowed us to experiment and develop media solutions in the cloud. This helped us position ourselves as a dynamic and robust M&E capability partner for our client. It was another instance of Hashers exemplifying our guiding principle of exhibit extreme ownership, delivering success for the firm, and enhancing the sense of belonging.

I earlier mentioned about celebrating important milestones with family members, and you might wonder how it ties into the impact on software development. Well, it actually plays a significant role. We celebrate our Hashers' success not just with them, but also with their families, aligning with the values and ethos of Indian society. We have a tradition of sending small letters and a trophy to the families to mark important milestones such as promotions or receiving a special award like top impactor. We personalize these gestures. Despite being unconventional, this practice, in place since our HashedIn inception, contributes to the happiness of our Hashers and creates meaningful family moments.

Culture has a tangible impact on software development, client success, and employee retention. In essence, you never know how different elements connect and influence one another. What's vital is ensuring that your guiding principles resonate with employees' DNA and are followed.

However, there are common pitfalls to avoid. One of the biggest mistakes organizations make is neglecting their culture or failing to address culture issues promptly. Ignoring problems won't make them go away. In fact, they tend to fester and impact productivity.

Another significant mistake is implementing a culture that is disconnected from the organization's core values. It's essential to recognize that having guiding principles on paper, or merely discussing them, isn't enough. To truly embed them in your organization DNA, everyone including leaders must actively use this blueprint and be held accountable for it. For instance, if you have a value like learn and share, then allocate dedicated time for each employee to do so, whether it's 5 percent, 6 percent of their work hours. Don't expect learn and share to happen magically without intentional effort. As your organization scales, a form of herd immunity begins to develop. If you have now shared the right cultural elements within your environment, they will naturally propagate and contribute to a cohesive story and a shared organizational DNA. On the flip side, if you neglect this, it may slip out of your control and you won't even be aware of it.

In summary, building and sustaining a SWE culture is indeed no small feat, but the undeniable benefits are well worth the effort. It paves the way for high-performing teams, innovative solutions, and a workplace where everyone can thrive. So whether you're a leader driving culture from the top or an individual making a difference within your team, always remember that culture isn't a static entity. It's something we collectively shape day by day. Together we can create a culture that fosters excellence, innovation, and a sense of belonging.

Thank you for joining me for this exploration of building and sustaining a SWE culture. I hope you would have found these insights valuable. If you have any questions or want to continue the conversation, feel free to reach out to me on social media. @himanshuhv would be the handle. Remember culture matters. It's something we all can contribute to. Stay tuned for more episodes, and until next time, keep coding, collaborating, and cultivating a culture of excellence.

Operator:

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