Leading & Managing Remote Teams

Including Specifics for Disaster Response Teams

October 2021

DH Network
Digital Humanitarian Network

Leading & Managing Remote Teams Including Specifics for Crisis Response Teams

■ ■ ■

By

Dijie (Sariel) Lei (dijie.lei@gmail.com | Linkedin)

Andrej Verity (verity@un.org | @andrejverity | LinkedIn)
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA)

Design

Lorena Velázquez | kunoichidesign.com

Alexandra Sternin | alexsternin.com

Table of Contents

■ ■ ■

Interviewees

■ ■ ■

Name	Organization	Position
Annika Coll Eriksson	Oficial de Area del Cuerpo de Bomberos (Fire Department Area Officer)	Comunidad de Madrid
Cameron Birge	Microsoft Philanthropies	Senior Programme Manager Humanitarian Partnerships
Darren Murph	GitLab	Head of Remote
Emma Hogbin	UN OCHA	Technical Project Manager
Francisco "Paco" Maldonado	The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)	Head of Emergency Operations
Jennie Phillips	Digital Global Health and Humanitarianism Lab	Director
John Marinos	UN OCHA	Regional Information Management Officer
Jose Maria Garcia	UN OCHA	Senior Programme Management
Joyce Monsees	CBCN | QuickSilk customer	Director of Operations
Lale Agusman	LK Business Communications	Co-Founder / Consultant
Lars Peter Nissen	ACAPS	Director
Lewis Curtis	Microsoft	Director of Services Disaster Response
Malka Older		Independent
Margherita Fanchiotti	UNEP/UN OCHA Joint Environment Unit	Associate Expert
Marianthi Eliodorou	Translators without Borders	Human Resources and Administration Coordinator
Natalia De Avila		Independent

Interviewees

■ ■ ■

Name	Organization	Position
Per Aarvik	Standby Task Force	Former President
Peter Muller	UNDAC	Global Service Lead
Russell Deffner	Humanitarian OpenStreeMap Team	Response Coordinator
Tyler Radford	Humanitarian OpenStreeMap Team	Executive Director

Key messages

Boost efficiency and alleviate fatigue by designating which communication channels are for what purposes and assigning urgency levels to each channel.

Adopt an asynchronous workstyle that is built on transparency, flexibility, resource accessibility and a culture of documentation.

Prepare (especially for disaster response teams) how to respond in situations where the Internet or communications channels may be hampered for hours or even days. Define common tasks and decision-making procedures in advance whenever possible.

Use meetings as a last resort for decision-making or problem-solving. Having a meeting might feel convenient, but it disobeys the rules of asynchronous and flexible work, thus damaging work efficiency. Take active steps in advance to make meetings harder to happen: require agendas, demand meeting flow and purpose, and require an explanation as to why each invitee is expected to attend.

Build a secure and supportive environment with clear expectations. Remote teams may find it hard to "shut down", and evidence points to a decrease in work-life balance in such teams. Help people prioritize their well-being by clarifying expectations and discouraging unwanted behaviours.

Do not expect virtual activities/happy hours to release stress or strengthen team bonds if other fundamentals related to work productivity and work-life balance are not in place.

Gathering remote teams for in-person team-building events or retreats is critical. If possible, take innovative steps to encourage self-initiated meet-ups or offline events.

Checklist

■ ■ ■

Productivity and Efficiency	Remote Organizations	Long-term Remote Response Support Teams	Short-term Remote Rresponse Support Teams
Written Communication			
Functions of Messaging Tools	✓	✓	✓
Searchable Conversation	✓	✓	✓
Rules on the Use of Email/Loose Template	✓	✓	✓
Online Collaboration Platforms/Cloud Services	✓	✓	✓
Flat Communication Structure	✓	☺	☺
"Four W" Questions Rules	☺	☺	✓
Clear Message to the Right Person	☺	☺	✓
Plans for Limited Communication	☺	☺	✓
Same Level of Tech Literacy		☺	☺
List of Glossaries		☺	✓
Accessibility	☺	☺	☺
Video Communication			
Meeting as the Last Resort	✓	☺	
Transparent Schedules	✓	✓	☺
Attach Agendas	✓	✓	☺
Rules of Engagement	✓	✓	✓
Inclusivity in Meetings	✓	☺	☺
Meeting Documentation	✓	✓	✓
Meeting Frequencies	✓	✓	☺
Meetings with In-country Responders		☺	✓
Sense of Purpose	☺	✓	✓
Audio Communication			
Considerations for Walking Meetings	☺		
Indoor Walking Meeting Alternatives	☺	☺	☺

	Remote Organizations	Long-term Remote Response Support Teams	Short-term Remote Rresponse Support Teams
Strategies			
Informal Conversations	✓	☺	☺
Team Trust	✓	✓	☺
Update Expectation & Work Flexibility	✓	✓	✓
Clear Function Distribution	✓	✓	✓
Clear Team Set-up	✓	✓	✓
A Culture of Recognition	✓	✓	☺
Infrastructure Policies	✓	✓	☺
Accomodations	✓	☺	
Work-life Balance			
Team Cultures and Norms around Expectation	✓	✓	☺
Discourage Unwanted Behaviours	✓	✓	☺
Validate Stories in Heads	✓	☺	☺
Be Cautious About the Right to Disconnect	✓	☺	
Five Self-reflective Questions	☺	☺	
Strategies			
Health & Wellness Resources	✓	✓	✓
"Empathy" Team	☺	☺	✓
Buddy Program		☺	☺
Psychological First-aid Training		☺	✓
Relaxation Techniques	☺	☺	✓
A Culture Around Mental Health	✓	✓	☺
Encourage Healthy Behaviours	✓	✓	☺
Other Policies	☺	☺	☺
Strategies			
Milestones and Sense of Belonging	✓	✓	✓
Design the Non-work Channels	✓	✓	☺
"Fun" Virtual Activities	☺	☺	
In-person Gathering	✓	✓	☺

Row categories (left vertical labels):
- **Productivity and Efficiency** — first section
- **Health and Wellness** — middle sections
- **Team Bonds** — last section

✓ = Required
☺ = Consider
Empty = not applicable

Introduction

■ ■ ■

COVID-19 forced, if not accelerated, companies' and organizations' plans to adjust their current ways of operation and to adapt to a new normal: remote work. Many people experienced the positive aspects of remote work, such as saving commuting time and money, spending more quality time with family or taking care of home duties. However, many others were woefully unprepared regarding the principles and policies needed to run a digitally distributed workforce. As a result, challenges emerged in the new remote workspace: meeting fatigue, prolonged working hours and deteriorating team bonds. Managers accustomed to working in the traditional office setting struggled with remote teams; without seeing team members at their desks or in a meeting, some managers struggled to believe that personnel were working productively. It became a trust issue, especially when personnel and teams had not been traditionally managed based on performance rather than their physical presence.

However, it seems apparent that there is no going back to the same level of in-office work. In the coming decade, more employees will demand remote jobs with high flexibility.[1] In the United States, most workers show a preference for working permanently from home.[2] More people than ever are quitting their jobs and looking for remote options, leading to a surge in job applications for remote positions.[3] Organizations need to be proactive in their response to the drastic change in preferences in the job market. If they fail to adapt, high-value talent will be lost, workplace diversity will be reduced and operational costs will outpace others. Attracting and retaining talent has shifted.
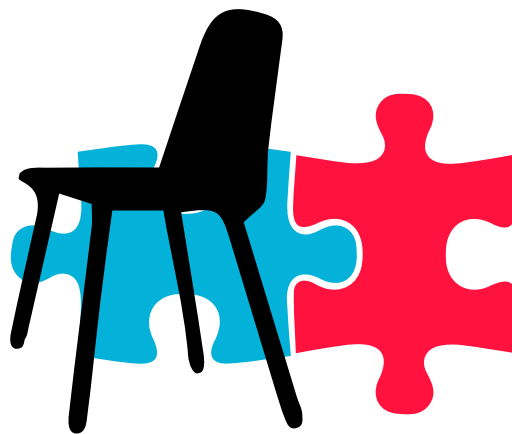
1   Molla, Rani. "Many People Don't Want to Work Unless It's from Home." Vox. 24 June 2021. Accessed 5 August 2021. https://www.vox.com/recode/22543409/remote-work-from-home-jobs-supply-demand-hiring-platforms.

2   Ibid.

3   Ibid.

> **"** *Guidelines and the policies will settle. Competencies around flexible workplaces will rise. Individual managers will level up to figure out how to lead a distributed workforce. People will be more agile with using digital tools, so things like tech exhaustion will go away. After people experience the hybrid format, they will settle into a rhythm that really works for them. And I think that we'll see more remote than in-person days. I also predict that physical spaces — office spaces — will look very different. The remote year has totally influenced what people want: smart boards, movable furniture, outdoor space for work. So, we're going to see physical spaces of offices look very different than they are today."* [4]

— Tsedal Neeley, Professor at Harvard Business School

With this document, we aim to guide managers of digitally distributed teams to success. We have summarized recent news, scoured journal articles and collected perspectives from leading organizations in the world of remote work management. We hope that the result guides managers who wish to foster a more productive, healthy and collaborative working environment for their digitally distributed team(s).

In humanitarian operations, remote support is not a new concept to many organizations, as crisis-mapping and information management are common remote roles in disaster response. Nevertheless, there is still much room to improve remote responses, including the creation of dedicated remote support teams. Using ideas and feedback from interviewees who have served in crisis operations, we compiled special considerations for humanitarian organizations and disaster response.

---

4   Molla, Rani. "Companies That Make People Return to the Office Will Lose Employees." Vox. 21 July 2021. Accessed 5 August 2021. https://www.vox.com/recode/22583285/companies-remote-work-home-office-tsedal-neeley-harvard.

Productivity and Efficiency

■ ■ ■

Working remotely means teams are communicating and collaborating virtually through various online tools and technologies. The productivity of remote teams will vary, mainly depending on the quality of remote/home office set-ups, the agility with communication and collaboration technologies, and the volume of conflicting duties and responsibilities. Recent studies from Microsoft show that workers perceive that they are working just as productively as when they were in the office.[5] Thus, managers need to develop a clear strategy for online communication and collaboration to achieve the best possible team outcomes. In that regard, this section introduces three essential aspects of good practices in remote work: written, video and audio communication.

Written Communication

a. Communication in remote teams is primarily in written form. Of the various types, messaging boosts efficiency and clarity the most. In fact, studies show that remote teams using instant messaging for communication are more creative than teams using emails.[6] Yes, chaotic communication styles or methods, regardless of the medium used, are counterproductive.

b. One critical aspect of online communication for teams is to define which tool or channel will be used for which purpose. By doing so, team members will know what urgency level to associate with each message and will more likely avoid notification burnout. For instance, if Slack is used for regular team chats, team members will know how to treat the channel and understand the expectation of responding only during working hours. If WhatsApp or SMS is used for SOS-type notifications, team members will know that they need to review and respond, even outside regular hours. A manager's key responsibility will be to make sure everyone uses the appropriate channels for their message types.

c. Organizing written communication is another important aspect in advancing productivity. Use keywords after the main text or use hashtags to make your conversation searchable.[7] Leverage built-in functions in your software and set rules or best practices for the team to follow. Clever use of hashtags (e.g. #suggestion or #fyi) can make instant messages easier to parse and find.

d. While instant messaging has become popular in the workplace, email provides other benefits that still make it the top communication option for many organizations. Emails are easy to access and can be read multiple times. Important emails can be marked and archived in folders. To maximize communication efficiencies in remote teams, clear guidance for email use is still suggested. For instance:

---

5   Wang, Yun, Ying Liu, Weiwei Cui, John Tang, Haidong Zhang, Doug Walston, and Dongmei Zhang. "Returning to the Office During the COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: Early Indicators from China." Microsoft. May 2021. Accessed 6 October 2021. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/publication/returning-to-the-office-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-recovery/.

6   "REMOTE by GitLab 2021: Organizational learning in the age of Distributed Work" YouTube video, 21:18, posted by GitLab, 29 Jun 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhKykCM4n6Q.

7   Zapier Editorial Team. "5 Tips for Communicating on a Remote Team." Zapier. 23 March 2020. Accessed 30 July 2021. https://zapier.com/blog/remote-work-communication/.

- Emails need to be short and to the point. Avoid unnecessary formality if possible.

- Provide a loose email template to help organize content. Include subsections such as situation explanations and action points, and request action by/reply by [dates] and [names].

- Always include your action points in the same location (e.g. top or bottom) so that people know where to focus.

> **" *We like to call it "at-a-glance communication" or 'at-a-glance messaging", so that when you get the email you know exactly where to look for your specific needs.* "**
>
> — Lale Agusman, LK Business Communication

e. Using online collaboration tools is highly recommended in remote work. With everyone working asynchronously, it is critical to create a central information exchange where everyone can comment on and update each other's work at any time and location. Beyond improving communication aspects, platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack and Google Chat, can help engage everyone involved, enhance transparency around decisions and provide a clearer picture of progress.

f. Creating a flat communication structure is also important. This empowers team members to reach out to colleagues from different departments but without going through layers of permissions and approvals, thereby making the organization more efficient and effective.

Crisis Response Specifics

In crisis response, assigning the purpose and urgency level to various channels is critical to response outcomes. A number of interviewees who served in response missions commented on the lack of clarity in daily communication:

- Who is the sender? Do I need to respond right now to this person?
- Why did they send the message?
- Who should respond if multiple people are included?
- How quickly do I need to respond?

1. Effectively sending a clear message to the right person is crucial. Before sending a message, think about the recipient and the above questions. Will the recipient understand the request? Do they know what needs to be actioned? By when?

2. Planning for a time when there are limited communication opportunities is imperative. Think about what the remote team can do when it is hard to assign tasks frequently (e.g. travelling team members or communication/technical failures). A number of interviewees mentioned they have been left to do nothing when the team gets busy. As a manager, be prepared for such situations by planning work as far in advance as possible so that team members are empowered to continue working, no matter the situation.

3. Train everyone to the same level of efficiency in using communication and collaboration tools.

4. Develop a glossary of terms and acronyms for your team in order to maximize clarity and ensure people can more quickly understand messages (especially if they are new to the team).

5. Aim for accessibility in your onboarding materials. For example, consider applying auto-generated subtitles or hiring someone to manually add subtitles to training videos, so as to maximize clarity and communication efficiency. This is particularly important when the training involves participants from local communities who might not be as fluent as your team members in the languages spoken in the videos.

Video Communication

Remote work often relies heavily on video-based communications. Whether these are short, stand-up type calls or lengthy events, how they are managed can make a significant difference to the team, its efficiency and its morale.

a. This may seem strange to some, but remote teams must consider meetings as the last resort. Upon transitioning to remote-only during the pandemic, many workers reported a significant increase in basic, scheduling sync-up meetings while working from home. Calls simply for collaboration or discussions can often cause people to lose boundaries and find themselves in endless back-to-back meetings. But meetings should not be the primary way to collaborate with teams that work asynchronously. Whoever initiates a call needs to ask: Why am I scheduling the call? Is the call the only way for an optimal solution, or are there other ways to better communicate the problem? These deliberations are not only applicable to remote teams but are also worth being considered for in-office teams.

> " *We are hardwired to think, 'Can I communicate or progress this piece of work forward without commandeering someone else's synchronous time?"*
>
> — Darren Murph, GitLab

> " *...It's what we call professional empathy; being mindful of other people's time and what they might be working on. Don't let it be a burden to turn up to a meeting. It should be interesting. It should have some added value for everybody concerned."*
>
> — Lale Agusman, LK Business Communication

b. To provide more tangible advice, managers should adopt meeting hygiene principles that maximize efficiency and promote engagement in the meeting. These include:

Make everyone's calendar/schedules visible and transparent.

- To avoid burnout and virtual-meeting fatigue, use online calendar tools or built-in calendar functions to make everyone's schedule visible to all colleagues.

- Make sure the team knows to review other colleagues' schedules before scheduling a call with them.

Attach an agenda to every meeting.

Draft a meeting agenda on a collaborative platform where colleagues can edit and provide feedback. When the agenda is ready, make sure the team sticks to the proposed timeline, and be mindful of the meeting's progress. The agenda should include the following:

- The meeting's timeline, including break times. Having breaks in long calls will allow attendees to engage better in the meetings, as they know they will have time later to grab a beverage, go to the washroom or take care of other home duties.
- The meeting's goal. Make sure the topics and goals are suitable and realistic within the meeting time.
    - Decide whether the meeting will be recorded.
    - Appoint a notetaker and a timekeeper.
    - Explain why the listed invitees are expected to attend, how they can benefit from the meeting and how they can substantially contribution to its goal(s).

Set up rules of engagement.

Several problems can impede a team member's engagement in virtual calls. One obvious distraction is attendees working on other tasks, meaning they are not fully focused. At home, other distractions can occur, such as doorbells or children.

While some of these issues may be inevitable, managers need to state clear rules of engagement. When drafting such rules, consider the following:

- Be clear on your expectations of engagement in a call. A good meeting agenda that clearly justifies why people need to show up minimizes the problem.
- Be clear on whether everyone needs to turn on their camera or be on mute, by default, in large meetings.
- Be clear of the procedures when an unexpected situation occurs (e.g. Internet failure). Show a positive attitude towards uncontrolled situations.
- Suggest that attendees turn off phones or other notifications to avoid distractions.
- Do not rely heavily on non-verbal communication cues, as they might not be visually explicit to others.
- Encourage using interactive built-in functions in the meeting software.
- Be clear on when and how to use text functions (i.e. making comments, queuing to speak next, etc.).
- When expecting a response from others, pause longer to account for potential Internet lag.
- Let the team participate in determining rules of engagement so they can decide collectively on what would help them engage while working from home. Managers may consider conducting a survey or having a meeting to determine the rules of engagement.

Promote inclusivity.

Promoting inclusivity in meetings involves training in two aspects: meeting facilitation and communication soft skills.

- Virtual meetings share some realities with in-person meetings: certain participants are always talkative while others contribute much less. The quieter people often come with a background of minority or have introverted personalities. With online meetings, it becomes even harder to know when someone finishes talking and thus when to interject yourself into the discussions.
- Meeting facilitation: Training to help people facilitate virtual meetings to make them more interactive and engaging. Encourage people to voice different opinions, even in front of senior managers.
- Communication soft skills: Training to help people articulate better and be confident. Managers might assume that people have decent communication skills simply for being hired in the first place. However, there are always cultural and personality differences at work. It is always helpful to provide the resources and training so that people can learn as needed.

Document the meeting's progress, outcomes and feedback.

Taking meeting notes, as well as writing down what did and did not go well, will help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of future meetings. This practice also allows people to correct meeting notes if their intended meaning was captured differently in the notes.

- A culture of documenting meetings is crucial for remote teams to succeed in their communication and collaboration.
- Organizational-wise, teams from different sections can learn from other's meeting notes and/or any lessons-learned material.

> **"** The difference with remote-first organizations is everything can be documented. And the best outcome is a repository knowledge that grows over time and increases, irrespective of people coming and going from the organization. People can contribute to it over time. As organizations do that, the documentation obviously improves and grows as well."[8]

> — Chris Herd, CEO, Firstbase

---

8   "REMOTE by GitLab 2021: What The Future of Work Will Look Like" YouTube video, 16:32, posted by GitLab, 29 Jun 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BstoFpubUg.

c. Pay attention to meeting frequency. When forming routines, consider the size of the team, everyone's time zones and the nature of the team function. Common types of calls in remote teams:

- **Bilateral calls for onboarding/weekly bilateral check-in:** Although we discourage having too many meetings or unstructured calls, bilateral calls between managers and teams are still important, especially in the onboarding process. Meeting synchronously with managers boosts members' engagement and helps them get to know each other. A study shows that employees were three times more likely to be engaged when managers communicated daily with their direct reports than when their managers did not communicate regularly with them.[9] Onboarding is more than assigning tasks clearly; it is guiding new members to understand that the manager cares about their personal growth in the position just as much as their contribution. Generally speaking, managers will schedule two to three 30-minute bilateral calls during onboarding week. Then, one should consider having a 15-minute weekly check-in with each person to see how things are progressing.
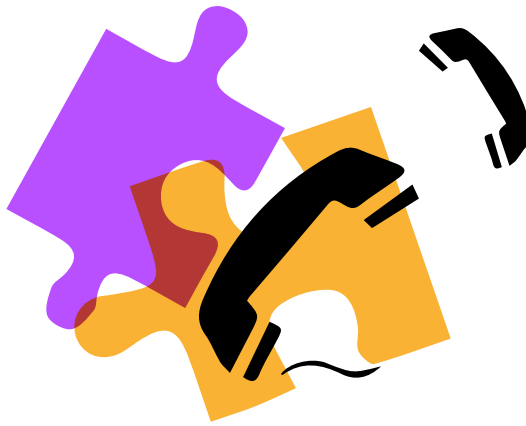
- **Daily team check-in:** In situations that require close collaboration between different roles in the team, a short daily meet-up will help to ensure that everyone is moving in the right direction. Depending on how geographically spread out the team is, consider having a daily 10-minute team check-in, with updates on everyone's work.

- **Start-of-week call:** Consider scheduling a 30-minute team meeting at the start of every week to chat about everyone's weekend and discuss what their plans are for the week ahead. This routine will help to build good relations with the team.

- **End-of-week calls:** These calls are optional for most teams working asynchronously. It makes more sense to have each team member submit a short weekly written report to reflect on the week's work progress than to have a call. However, in cases where managers do not have much time to communicate with team members during the week, end-of-week calls will be beneficial.

9   Peart, Natalia. "The Most Important Ways Companies Can Improve Work-Life Balance." Forbes. 6 November 2020. Accessed 27 July 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliapeart/2020/11/06/the-most-important-ways-companies-can-improve-work-life-balance/?sh=3eaf6ada79a9.

Crisis Response Specifics

During humanitarian response missions, regular meetings become unavoidable. When the remote teams share the time zone with the emergency's location, having two calls a day might be necessary in terms of planning tasks and reflecting on progress.

However, in situations where the remote team is scattered around the world, there are still takeaways to make meetings efficient: make clear meeting agendas for every meeting and instill a culture of documentation.

- If budget permits, humanitarian response teams are recommended to hire a dedicated person/documentarian to take meeting notes and document progress. This is to avoid conflicting duties or careless documentation if the role is assigned as someone's side job. Another benefit of having a dedicated documentarian is that they sometimes have better insights of what went wrong than the teams involved in the situation do, and they can provide constructive feedback to the team's operation.

Remote support team members are encouraged to attend (remote) meetings with in-country responders during the response to ensure a clear understanding of the operational realities and on-the-ground requirements.

- Connecting with the in-country responders can help foster team morale and ensure that the remote team is well oriented to the required tasks. Wherever possible, teams should consider having a dedicated focal point in-country who can continually communicate with remote teams and clearly articulate local demands in a way that remote teams can best support.

Instilling a sense of purpose within the organization prior to emergency response missions is particularly important for conducting successful responses.

- It would be time-consuming and inefficient if team leaders in each emergency had to reiterate why everyone is present, what their individual responsibilities are or what needs to be achieved. By establishing a sense of purpose through training and standard operating procedures, team members will know from the outset what is expected from their work as well as how to coordinate with the in-country focal point.

Audio Communication

Not all calls need to be video based, and not all calls need to happen with everyone at their desk. The idea of having audio-only meetings is to help reduce everyone's screen time and, where possible, even include light physical exercises, such as stretching or walking. With so many people forced into remote work during the pandemic, people are sitting for more hours than usual. We suggest that organizations take an active role in encouraging healthy working styles that refresh minds and restore vitality.

Stanford University researchers found that walking increases creativity,[10] and other researchers found that walking meetings improve company culture by breaking down the hierarchical barriers between colleagues.[11] In general, it is worth experimenting with audio-only walking meetings. Apple's Steve Jobs, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter's Jack Dorsey all support walking meetings.[12] Just one year into the pandemic, there were already start-ups working on phone-enabled walking-meeting apps that are more than phone calls or Zoom calls, as they include additional features such as built-in calendars, auto-transcription and smart-mute.[13]

Here are some tips/considerations to help you build a culture that supports audio meetings:

a. Audio meetings are most helpful for smaller meetings or bilateral conversations, where most attendees will be listening.

b. Research audio-based meeting apps to find the one most appropriate for your team.

c. Remind attendees to check the time, weather, air quality and neighbourhood security before they go out.

Where the environment does not allow walking meetings, team members can consider alternatives to add movement in a call:[14]

a. **Desk yoga or stretching.** These are great options when you don't have time to leave the house for a walk in between meetings.

b. **Breathwork.** Sitting (or standing) quietly for a few minutes with your eyes closed and focusing on your breath can be a powerful addition to your routine. It calms, grounds and energizes you all at the same time.

c. **A 60-second workout.** Even if you have only a minute between meetings, filling that minute with jumping jacks, push-ups or jump rope can add an instant jolt of energy.

d. **Alternate standing and sitting.** When you absolutely cannot break away from your desk, break up sitting with standing intervals.

---

10   Wong, May. "Stanford Study Finds Walking Improves Creativity." Stanford News. 24 April 2014. Accessed 23 August 2021. https://news.stanford.edu/2014/04/24/walking-vs-sitting-042414/.

11   Beheshti, Naz. "A New Variation On Steve Jobs's Walking Meetings-And Other Ways To Avoid Remote Burnout." Forbes. 21 October 2020. Accessed 23 August 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2020/10/21/a-new-variation-on-steve-jobss-walking-meetings-and-other-ways-to-avoid-remote-burnout/.

12   Ko, Vanessa. "Let's Take a Walk: A Push for Meetings on the Move." CNN. 21 March 2013. Accessed 23 August 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/20/business/walking-meetings/index.html.

13   "One Startup's Solution for Zoom Fatigue? The Walk and Talk." Wired. 30 March 2021. Accessed 23 August 2021. https://www.wired.com/story/spot-walking-meetings-startup-solution-for-zoom-fatigue/.

14   Beheshti.

Strategies

Encourage informal conversations

People working in offices regularly have casual conversations down the hallway, during lunch breaks or after work. But those who work remotely miss the opportunities to chat casually with colleagues about life and work. These chats and serendipitous meetings are a reason that organization leaders often want people physically in the office.

However, there are opportunities in informal conversations in remote work that would help organizations grow exponentially. In the office setting, people talk only to colleagues sitting nearby or on the same floor. Regularly contacting executive members from the organization would rarely happen for those who just joined the team or who work at a lower level. However, technology has disrupted that paradigm. In a talk by Prithwiraj Choudhury, he presented research that shows **a strong positive effect on productivity outcomes amongst remote personnel when they meet the senior managers virtually and have water-cooler chats every week (even if they need to be scheduled).**[15]

The productivity boost is a result of managers sharing ideas and advice in conversations that normally would not happen in an office setting.[16] Therefore, we recommend hosting informal conversation sessions that include people in leadership roles and randomly selected participants from lower levels. It is more than a strategy for high productivity but a way to connect and bond with each other.

Ensure team trust as a premise of teamwork

Patrick Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*[17] presents a good example of different stages of team dysfunctions: trust, conflict, commitment, accountability and results. Trust is the most essential element whereby the team is capable of learning and moving on from conflicts, honouring commitments, holding each other accountable or achieving the best results.

Building trust within a team is critical for remote teams and traditional, in-office teams. The most foundational principle of managing a remote team is to have trust in team members by default and assume good intentions of one another.[18] When mistakes happen, a good team knows not to blame others but to assume the positive and collaborative intention.

Remember, micromanagement disrupts the trust between managers and remote teams. If managers keep interrupting ongoing work, the team will neither stay focused nor deliver on expectations, thus leaving them feeling frustrated.

15   "REMOTE by GitLab 2021: Virtual Watercoolers – Informal Interactions in a WFA Workplace" GitLab. Accessed 28 July 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVMUworx2Vk

16   Ibid.

17   Five Dysfunctions of a Team: https://www.tablegroup.com/product/overcoming-the-five-dysfunctions-a-field-guide/ and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Five_Dysfunctions_of_a_Team#Summary

18   "GitLab Values." GitLab. Accessed 20 July 2021. https://about.gitlab.com/handbook/values/

> **❝** *It is natural to trust one's team if the leader creates a foundation of purpose. Many newly remote managers who were used to 'managing by walking around' are struggling to inspire their distributed teams. Rather than building a foundation of purpose and trusting by default, many are pushing for teams to return to physical offices.* **❞**

— Darren Murph, GitLab

Overall, it is recommended to build team culture and norms around a common **sense of purpose.** This involves providing resources to help team members better understand their role(s), their responsibilities and functions in the team, and the goals of the team. Such a structure helps to build trust. Then, whenever emergencies or disagreements arise, everyone is clear about what matters the most and how to achieve the best results.

Crisis Response specifics:

It is imperative that team members deployed (remotely) to an emergency response develop a sense of urgency and a sense of purpose beforehand. To ensure this happens, it is critical to provide members with relevant training and resources to read in non-emergency settings. If an in-person meeting or training is also possible, this can be great for team-bonding and trust-building before everyone works together (remotely) during a response.meeting agendas for every meeting and instill a culture of documentation.

Update expectations of how to get work done (flexibility of work)

To maximize work efficiency, it is important to adopt an asynchronous workstyle in remote teams. While outlining different levels of job autonomy, Matt Mullenweg, Automattic CEO, noted that remote teams scattered around the world benefit from asynchronous teamwork.

The pandemic has increased the demand for flexibility within work environments. It becomes less about where you are or the hours you worked, but more about delivering to expectations. Therefore, managers are encouraged to update their expectations for team members and value the quality of deliverables over other aspects of the work environment.[19]

---

19   Mullenweg, Matt. "Distributed Work's Five Levels Of Autonomy." Matt Mullenweg. 10 April 2020. Accessed 16 July 2021. https://ma.tt/2020/04/five-levels-of-autonomy/.

To help solidify an organization's values of flexibility towards remote work, increasing the accessibility of resources becomes crucial. Accessibility refers to tasks such as having meeting notes and agendas available to members prior to the meeting; documenting the meeting and making it visible to all team members; and providing clear standard operating procedures for regular and irregular activities that are expected to be consistent and professional. Improving accessibility helps to build inclusivity for people who cannot attend given meetings, for people who need more time to review/process content (e.g. if their first language is not the primary working language), or for new team members trying to understand how to complete certain tasks, etc.

Communicating across various time zones can take time. Although communication may take more time in remote teams, the results and decisions are usually better.[20] Managers must appreciate that a distributed team is spread across time zones and thus members will not always respond immediately. A later response with deliberations can often be of better quality than an immediate reaction. Adapting to new communication styles and speeds while leveraging features in modern communication tools can feel like a major adjustment, but the long-term benefits will be significant.

Crisis Response Specifics:

Before recruiting team members, understand what type of remote support your team needs. A clear function distribution will help you select the remote teams, provide the appropriate training and deploy them more efficiently.

You need to design your team based on the expected response rate, functions, communications, responsibilities, budget, urgency level and deployment time. Consider the remote team's capabilities and constraints before assigning tasks. The different types of remote support teams in humanitarian response include:

- Geographically distributed team supporting a sudden-onset disaster. Demands 24/7 coverage with long hours over a short period of time. Members remain in their home location.

- Remote team, but physically together in one location (away from the disaster front line). Demands time-zone-specific coverage with long hours over a short period of time. Members travel to one central location and work for a defined period of time.

- Remote/collaborative teams, with team members going into various offices from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. Collaborative environment with limited response hours.

- Geographically distributed team with individuals working from anywhere during regular working hours. Such teams often support longer-term ongoing projects and teams.[21]

---

20   Ibid.

21   This is a good plan for recruiting global volunteers who may only be able to donate their time and efforts whenever they are available.

Set supportive policies for work infrastructure

Setting supportive policies for remote team members will help them maximize their productivity. Although organizations do not control a team member's home set-up, certain initiatives can be considered:

- Work with team members to optimize their home-office set-up wherever possible. What options do they have for physical space or quiet space? Even though remote workers save time and money by not commuting, the physical and mental fatigue developed while working remotely can cause additional expenses.

" *...most of my team has been going through physical therapy, including myself, because we realized we were slouching, we didn't have the right ergonomic set-up. It is really important. Have your team take pictures of themselves working and hold each other accountable and do an assessment. Are your elbows at a 90-degree angle? Are your feet touching the ground? Do you have the right monitors? Really make sure you really know your team set-up.* "

— Anonymous Interviewee
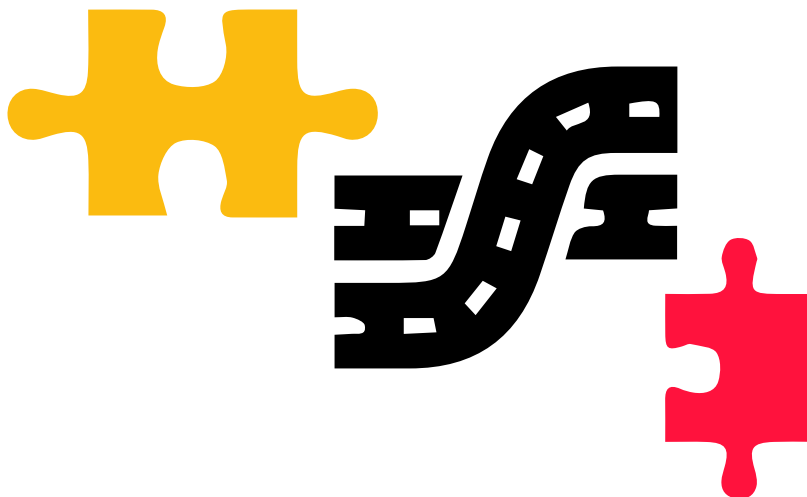
- If a budget is available, an organization should consider paying for or subsidizing items such as higher-bandwidth Internet, quality office chairs, a standing desk or even a coffee machine. Consider other innovative approaches where possible, such as buying remote members coffee-shop gift cards if they have to (or prefer to) work in a cafe.[22]

- Encourage team members to bring plants into their workspace. Research shows that office plants increase productivity by 15 per cent.[23]

- Educate people about well-tested and widely agreed home-office set-up tips and unhealthy working habits.[24]

  - For instance, suggest shifting the worktable to face the sunlight. Studies show that facing sunlight increases work satisfaction and organizational commitment.[25]

  - Hold talks and discussions about good home-office practices, including professional advice on lighting, sitting postures, ambience noise, switching workspaces, and the potential health consequences of bad working habits.

  - Be aware that even if people have all the proper infrastructure, they may sometimes still work from their kitchen, sofa, or bed. If continued over time, these inappropriate working styles will impede their health and lead to decreased work efficiency and sustainability.

Be accommodating

As long as deliverables and organization duties are not affected, we strongly suggest that remote-work policies accommodate flexibility that helps alleviate distress related to home duties. For example, if a remote team member needs to take a couple of hours off one day to collect their children, let them do so, but with the understanding that they keep up with their work progress and expected deliverables. During regular working hours, and barring any commitments such as meetings, remote workers should have the autonomy to decide when and how to take their breaks. Going out for a walk, buying a coffee, or even taking a yoga class around lunchtime does not have to fall on a rigid in-office-type schedule. Providing such flexibility to remote team members will help them perform better.

22   "Why Plants in the Office Make Us More Productive." ScienceDaily. 1 September 2014. Accessed 20 August 2021. https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/09/140901090735.htm.

23   Mullenweg, Matt. "Distributed Work's Five Levels Of Autonomy."

24   We recommend checking out resources under the "Remote Workspaces" from Zapier's Remote Guide: https://zapier.com/learn/remote-work/.

25   An, Mihyang, Stephen M. Colarelli, Kimberly Obrien, and Melanie E. Boyajian. "Why We Need More Nature at Work: Effects of Natural Elements and Sunlight on Employee Mental Health and Work Attitudes." Plos One 11, no. 5 (23 May 2016). Accessed 20 August 2021. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0155614.

Health and Wellness

■ ■ ■

Social isolation, increased workload, challenges with "shutting off" after work hours and back-to-back virtual meetings can make remote work exhausting. Studies show that half of all people working from home express moderate to extreme levels of concerns regarding their emotional well-being and work-life balance.[26] In fully remote teams, it can be challenging to identify those who are experiencing such issues. Team leaders need to become attentive to small cues and ensure that enough dedicated time is available to discuss a range of topics bilaterally with each team member (e.g. weekly bilateral calls).

Research shows that managers tend to think their remote team members are "thriving" more than they really are.[27] The pandemic has exacerbated certain situations, with evidence showing that remote workers are doing worse than in pre-pandemic times and are expressing a rising concern about their mental health. Managing a remote team's health and wellness is finally being recognized as an indispensable consideration. This consideration is not only for the benefit of individual team members but also for the organization, as surveys indicate that 80 per cent of workers are willing to quit their job and move to a company that cares about employees' mental health. [28]

Work-life Balance

Deteriorating work-life balance has been the most widely discussed (remote work) topic during the pandemic. Many organizations did not initially prioritize remote members' work-life balance, since they had little experience in addressing the issue in a remote setting. Remote workers need more than simple encouragement to mute notifications or to adopt new after-work routines.

Suggestions for improving remote workers' work-life balance:

Set up team cultures and norms around expectations

Promoting work-life balance starts with understanding why the team's work-life balance may be poor. Managers often feel insecure about whether team members are working; team members are not sure if they made themselves visible enough to their manager(s). Such feelings of insecurity and uncertainty are sources of anxiety and can easily evolve into hypervigilance, self-doubt, a sense of fear and burnout. These manifest into behaviours such as replying to messages outside of working hours, almost as a way of saying: "Hey, I'm here. I'm working after hours. Please give me positive feedback."

26   "The Biggest Concerns of Working-From-Home Employees." Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/202010/the-biggest-concerns-working-home-employees.

27   "Microsoft revealed the latest truths about working from home. One is truly disturbing." Microsoft. https://www.zdnet.com/article/microsoft-revealed-the-latest-truths-about-working-from-home-one-is-truly-disturbing/

28   Westfall, Chris. "Mental Health And Remote Work: Survey Reveals 80% Of Workers Would Quit Their Jobs For This." Forbes. 8 October 2020. Accessed 20 July 2021.

The most useful and oftentimes ignored practice is to establish team culture and norms around work-life balance and mental health. More specifically, managers should be explicit about their expectations with team members, such as when they are expected to reply to messages or emails, what behaviours indicate good performance and how they can ask questions. Managers must:

- Be ready to talk about these expectations with team members and discuss what makes them feel comfortable in raising questions or concerns. If team members need to schedule a bilateral meeting to discuss expectations or seek clarifications, create the space and encourage such behaviour.

- Explore other practices, such as putting "request action by/reply by [date/time]" in the email subject line and encouraging team members to mute message notifications outside of working hours.

> " *I just want to meet expectations and get through COVID. But really, what does exceeding look like, what does super-exceeding look like? They may not fully know. But it's important, both for managers to be able to set expectations and for staff to feel safe and empowered, to ask that question. And I will tell you, underrepresented groups really need coaching in this area. This is super uncommon or uncomfortable.* "

— Anonymous Interviewee

It is equally important for managers to develop strategies that discourage unwanted behaviours. Team members must understand that an organization is investing in them for the long term, meaning that their behaviours need to be sustainable. If unwanted behaviour is seen, managers should make it clear that the organization views this as an indication that the individual is not taking good care of her/himself and they will not be promoted on the basis of such behaviour. A person's inability to take care of themselves will not make them a good leader in the future.

Validate the stories in your head

Resolving team conflict and uneasy feelings is critical to sustain team harmony. Remote teams must expect misunderstandings to happen over time, especially as many non-verbal cues are not present in the virtual space. These misunderstandings can lead to "stories'' that individuals have in their head. If not validated or checked, these stories can evolve into paranoia and/or escalate into team conflict and drama. They can worsen mental health and compromise team trust. Therefore, it is imperative that managers foster a friendly and secure environment for open conversations.

> **"** *It's really important to help people, and the only way through it is to validate the story and for someone to open it up and say things like: 'Hey, the story in my head is that you don't like how I'm doing this one, that I'm not adding enough value, or that I'm not as valuable as other people on the team.' These kinds of stories just creep in. And they might not notice, but it really creeps in. And so, people need to have the psychological safety to say: 'I have a thing in my head. Can we validate it? We will talk about this.' It could be between peers; it can be with the manager. But this is something all managers really need to focus on.* **"**

— Anonymous Interviewee

Be mindful that opening up, even in a bilateral conversation, might still be hard for some cultures, where explicit expressions of one's negative thoughts are not normally encouraged. Open conversations are a Western idea that does not always make sense to other cultures. Therefore, managers must show their good intentions by encouraging such openness, but not force it on everyone.

Be cautious about the The right to disconnect

The The right to disconnect was enacted in many European countries even before the pandemic.[29] Shortly after the pandemic began, Ireland was the first country to incorporate remote members by recognizing the distributed nature of a remote workforce.[30] No matter where the team works, they are granted the right to respond only to work matters within their working hours. However, organizations need to be cautious when adopting right-to-disconnect policies and regulation, even if they're designed to protect remote workers, as they could undermine the work flexibility that remote members enjoy. [31]
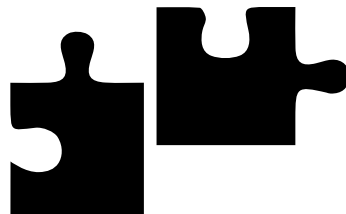
29   Henshall, Angela. "Can the 'right to Disconnect' Exist in a Remote-work World?" BBC Worklife. 21 May 2021. Accessed 19 August 2021.

30   Ibid.

31   Ibid.

> **❝ Len Shackleton, a professor of economics at the University of Buckingham who analyses the economics of labour markets, explains that if employees are banned from connecting at certain times, like weekends or evenings, then 'employers are going to want to be damned sure you're available and fully occupied during your contracted hours.' He says, 'much of the flexibility of working at home, which has allowed you to nip out to the supermarket or to pick up the kids and make the time up later, will disappear. Employers will want to know why you haven't answered that phone call or email [during your 'on' hours].❞** [32]

When digitally distributed teams are working truly asynchronously with different daily schedules, it is unwise to introduce strict regulations on when people need to "switch off". In other words, we are helping organizations to create a mindset that neither mandates working hours nor after-work hours and provides the best resources and strategies in promoting mental health on the basis of work flexibility. Nevertheless, in cases where the remote member is benefitting from working in a certain time window and finds themselves more productive working remotely, they should be encouraged to practice the the right to disconnect.

Five self-reflective questions to managers

There are definitely situations where problems cannot be solved, tasks cannot be completed or decisions cannot be made if everyone is "switched off" at the same time. Business psychologist Dr. Camille Preston outlined five self-reflective questions for managers to ask as the last resort to protect teams' work-life balance and wellness:[33]

1. Do you have a compelling need to have your employees available online all the time?

2. If not, have you communicated with employees about when they don't need to be available online?

3. If you need some employees available 24/7, ask yourself: a) Who are these employees? b) Why are they required to be available online outside regular work hours? c) Are these employees compensated for their additional availability, and if not, could they be? d) What is their constant availability worth to you and your organization (i.e. how much are you willing to pay for 24/7 access)?

4. What structures and frameworks do you already provide to empower your employees to make good decisions about managing their time online and off?

5. What additional structures and frameworks could you provide to empower your employees to make better decisions about managing their time online and off?

---

32   Ibid.

33   Preston, Camille. "The Right to Disconnect." Psychology Today. 1 June 2021. Accessed 19 August 2021. https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202106/the-right-disconnect.

Strategies

Provide health and wellness resources

- A remote package that covers useful practices and resources for physical and mental health in remote work is useful as a first step in self-help.

- Consider hiring an "empathy team" comprising yoga, meditation and fitness professionals to take care of remote members' well-being. They could organize drop-in meditation, yoga or workout sessions during working hours.

- Make professional psychologists or counsellors available to team members. Encourage remote members to use the services and develop personal relationships with the mental health-care providers.

Crisis Response specifics:

Remote and locally deployed response teams share the risk of exposing themselves to traumatic textual and graphic information. Remote teams could be more vulnerable if they are working in an isolated environment or a place where nobody understands what they are going through. Sometimes it can be hard to share stories with others due to confidentiality requirements.

Suggestions:

- Consider having a dedicated person or an "empathy team" that comprises mental health professionals who check in with the team regularly and provide help if needed.

- Strengthen team resilience by promoting peer support/buddy programmes: Ask your team to regularly check in with each other and encourage them to develop closer relationships.

- Consider training a portion of the team on psychological first aid. This allows team members to hear other's problems, identify potential mental health issues and connect people at risk with the best available resources. The training will help team members cope with the effects of various stresses during deployment.

- When time permits, train the remote response teams with useful relaxation techniques before deployment to add another layer of resilience against stress and anxiety.

Build a culture around mental health

A culture of mental health awareness often starts with hearing mental health stories from others. As such stories are shared, these invisible struggles turn into real, visible experiences for everyone to understand. It is extremely effective when organizations encourage senior leaders to talk about their experiences with mental health issues. Knowing that people in leadership share such experiences, team members generally become more empowered to talk about mental health and are more supportive to their peers.

Encourage healthy behaviours

- **Supportive policies on health activities:** Not everyone enjoys or is able to benefit from yoga or meditation sessions. Consider subsidizing other health-related activities or even pairing up with gym facilities. Health activities can range from exercising at gyms and swimming pools to using a home-cleaning service.

- **Offer incentives:** Organize virtual challenges related to working out, drinking enough water, eating healthy food, reaching a daily step count, etc. Provide a small monthly prize for winners, such as gift cards, coupons, or healthy snack boxes delivered to their house.

- **Guide everyone to understand where they are at their best:** Offer psychological training or guidance materials to help remote members be self-conscious about when they feel their best. Business psychologist Dr. Camille Preston suggested approaching self-consciousness in a two-phase process. First, think about the moment when you feel the flow; when you are immersed in an activity and lose the awareness of time and self,[34] and when you feel the most productive, impactful and creative.[35] Once you have clarified this for yourself, reflect on how you can bring these moments to your life again, whether it is about calmness, joy or inspiration.[36] Understanding *when* a team is at its best helps to design and implement the most effective policies over the long term.

Other ideas

- **Wellness days:** Allow one or two days off every month or quarter simply to focus on mental and physical wellness.

- **Peer check-in:** Assign a person to check in with another randomly selected remote colleague every week and have casual conversations.

34   "Flow." Psychology Today. Accessed 20 August 2021. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/flow.

35   Preston, Camille. "Remote Work and the Psychology of Space." Psychology Today. 16 October 2020. Accessed 20 August 2021. https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202010/remote-work-and-the-psychology-space.

36   Ibid.

Team-bonding

■ ■ ■

Team-bonding in digitally distributed teams is a difficult mission. This is especially true among newcomers, who have likely not had prior contact with anyone in the organization. Microsoft research shows that after the pandemic hit, teams began to lose some of the connectedness that they had when in person.[37] The way to restore connectedness is not merely by having more virtual cocktails, virtual games or virtual chats every week. The fundamentals must be in place before implementing practices to strengthen team bonds. Survey data from Microsoft's research noted that "managers who have taken on a greater role in helping individual employees prioritize tasks and manage work-life balance have kept team morale higher."[38]

Below, we provide different strategies to enhance team morale on the basis of good work-life balance and work facilitation.

Milestones and sense of belonging

Every organization has a different culture and a different way of strategic planning. Remote teams are more susceptible to getting lost on what they are working towards or how they have contributed to an organization's goals. It is therefore important to have a clear strategy that outlines the goals and plans and is repeated on a regular basis. Although managers need to know when their team achieves a milestone, they should also celebrate throughout the journey in order to help build a sense of team morale.

> **"** *Set up a cadence where you are celebrating your way through that. So, it's not just that people understand how they all fit together towards a greater goal but also they don't burn out. They get these pauses as if they're climbing a mountain. Every time you reach a summit, you want to pause and look how far we've come.* **"**
>
> — Anonymous Interviewee

Design non-work channels

Explore different types of software to design your non-work chat space. Encourage teams to create their own chat rooms based on hobbies and interests. These virtual water coolers will lead to non-work-related interactions and social events, which will boost connections within remote teams.

"Fun" virtual activities

During the pandemic, organizations have been creative in planning virtual "fun" activities for

---

37 Rosenbaum, Eric. "The Message Microsoft Is Sending to Managers after a Decline in Team Connectedness." CNBC. 30 March 2021. Accessed 2 August 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/microsoft-message-to-managers-after-decline-in-team-connections.html.

38 Ibid.

remote teams. But do people really find them "fun" and helpful for team-building? Everyone defines fun differently; it varies from their personality, age group, gender, and cultural background. For instance, senior teams might prefer spending more time with family than playing a virtual game. People from a collectivist cultural background might find it harder to perform at competitive-style events than people of individualistic cultures. Or some people just find it exhausting to attend another online meeting on top of their other tasks.

Generally speaking, we recommend the following principles of designing virtual events:

- Conduct a survey with your team to collect ideas and define collectively what types of virtual activities work best. Focus on what the team is looking for in virtual events and design the events accordingly. Determine the event's length and frequency based on everyone's preferences. (Perhaps 10 to 15 minutes every other week.)

- Make sure virtual events happen during working hours, preferably on the last day of the working week.

- Virtual events are truly voluntary. Ensure that people do not feel pressured to show up.

- Collect feedback regularly and update how you set up virtual events.

If your team is looking for a novel virtual activity every week, consider using virtual events platforms and borrow ideas from other sources to make it happen. If the team finds that instant-messaging channels are better than virtual events, let them do that. Virtual events must not be a burden or a chore.

Crisis Response specifics:

Team-bonding between a remote response team and local responders can be difficult, as they do not share the same daily interactions. Often, remote teams are updated about the crisis situation only during set calls or via instant messages, whereas local responders can have casual conversations during breaks or after a day of on-site work. The local information exchange can mean that local responders may develop a closer relationship with each other than with remote teams.

Bring the remote team together and function as a whole. Assign a remote team leader and make sure the members connect with one another. Make it clear that they are a team, and they can support and chat with each other.

When setting up the remote team, strongly consider:

- **Introducing everyone before the mission:** If possible, arrange an icebreaker session or a simple introduction session with in situ teams and remote teams.

- **Setting up a buddy system:** Consider assigning a "buddy" to each remote member and have them check in with each other regularly.

In-person gatherings

Managing digitally distributed teams does not mean that you are managing a group of people who never meet in real life. They still need in-person meetings to grow and connect the same way as every other team. In-person gatherings provide a great opportunity for colleagues to find commonalities in areas such as their cultures, languages, hobbies, sports, ways of parenting and travel experiences. Such things are often more easily discovered in person than virtually.

> ❝ *Knowing the colleagues, their tone of voice, their mannerism, facilitates every further dialogue that will happen online later on. Sarcasm, humour, dry sentences can be then interpreted in a lighter and more conscious way, leading to better communication overall. Work can be done too, since there are activities and discussions that are more effective in person, but it's almost secondary in importance.* ❞ [39]
>
> — Erin 'Folletto' Casali, Intense Minimalism

Many all-remote companies are having periodic in-person gatherings primarily as a way to socialize with each other. WooCommerce, a part of Automattic, summarized its three types of in-person gatherings: [40]

- **Grand meet-up**   • **Team meet-up**   • **Occasional meet-up**

A grand meet-up would include a large number of people, perhaps the entire organization. Such an event needs to consider size, purpose and best environments to enable cross-department interactions. GitLab, a fully remote company, designs its annual meet-up to be centred around culture-building while aiming to minimize the number of work-related interactions. In this way, teams can establish a foundation of rapport in person and leverage that to create a more efficient work environment once teams return to their respective remote locations. [41]

A team meet-up on a smaller scale and higher frequency can vary in focus and size depending on the team dynamics. WooCommerce arranges meet-ups to create socialization opportunities. [42] GitLab's executive quarterly gatherings are more work centred [43] and include a well-planned agenda to ensure that in-person time is used most efficiently. [44] In addition, a documentarian takes meeting notes to share with the rest of the teams as a way to promote transparency and

---

39   Casali, Erin 'Folletto'. "Distributed Companies: The Importance of Meeting Face-to-Face." Intense Minimalism. 7 December 2015. Accessed 29 July 2021. https://intenseminimalism.com/2015/distributed-companies-the-importance-of-meeting-face-to-face/.

40   Ibid.

41   Darren Murph, Head of Remote at GitLab.

42   Casali, Erin 'Folletto'.

43   Darren Murph, Head of Remote at GitLab.

44   Ibid.

inclusivity in the organization.[45] Regardless of the purpose, organizations find that these in-person events greatly boost morale and enable better collaboration going forward.

Other occasional meet-ups can be organized in formal and informal ways, from having dinners together to organizing offline events. GitLab encourages self-initiated offline events by posting tips and advice on how to plan a good event.[46] In general, periodic in-person gatherings can vary in size, frequency and form, and they are an indispensable part of the experience with remote team-bonding.

Budget limitation: Financing in-person gatherings is always a challenge for small- to medium-sized organizations. If sufficient budget is not available to bring everyone together, organizations still need to find ways to create a supportive environment where people are encouraged to bond in person. For example, organizations could consider allowing managers to travel to cities or areas where several colleagues are based. Or consider setting supportive policies, such as meal or travel subsidies, that encourage self-initiated local or regional meet-ups.

---
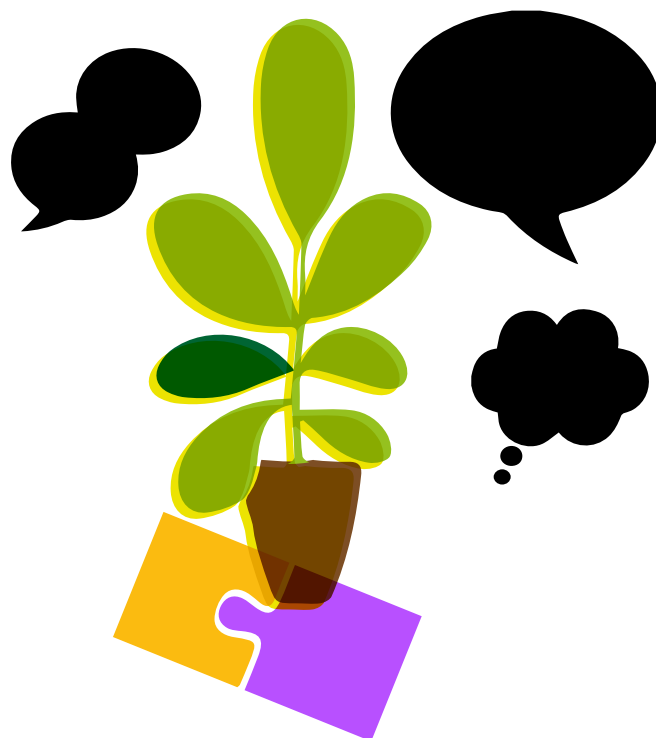
45   Ibid.

46   "GitLab Meetups." GitLab. Accessed 29 July 2021. https://about.gitlab.com/community/meetups/.

Conclusion

■ ■ ■

An important aspect of remote work is decentralizing activities. In traditional settings, organizations facilitate conversations and events through a centralized hub; everyone participates at one time and in the same space. But with remote teams, we need innovation around communication, collaboration and team-bonding channels. Teams need to be empowered or trained to self-initiate conversations, to organize events and collaborate smartly with colleagues working across time and space, and to adopt decentralized interaction dynamics.

In the past two years, every aspect of life has undergone a significant shake-up. Organizations that embraced the idea of remote work or hybrid remote work are leading the way. Recognizing that these work modes are likely here to stay, and that effectively managing a digitally distributed workforce requires new skills and approaches, we have outlined strategies and solutions to improve policies in three aspects: productivity, health and wellness, and team-bonding.

We hope that our research will help humanitarian and non-humanitarian organizations improve daily operations by fostering a more human-centric remote-working culture.[47] Integrating this culture into a comprehensive workplace and people strategy, organizations have the ability to build a robust, high-performing inclusive workforce.[48]
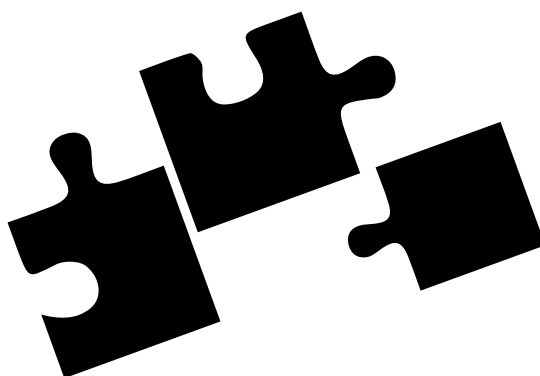
47   Given the scope of the research, management tips and strategies for hybrid work models are not discussed and require further consideration in terms of hybrid collaboration.

48   Liu, Jennifer. "For Some LGBTQ Employees, Remote Work Is a 'Game Changer' for Inclusion." CNBC. June 22, 2021. Accessed 22 July 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/22/remote-work-can-be-more-equitable-and-inclusive-to-lgbtq-employees.html

Annex: Links to Resources

■ ■ ■

Source	Title	Categories/Tags	URL
Advances in Radiation Oncology	Achieving effective remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic: A work design perspective	Workspace	DOI:10.1111/apps.12290
Applied Psychology: An International Review	Boundary Management and Work-Nonwork Balance While Working from Home	Work-life Balance	DOI: 10.1111/apps.12300
Automattic	The Importance of Meeting In-Person	In-person Gathering	https://ma.tt/2018/10/the-importance-of-meeting-in-person/
Automattic	Welcoming New Colleagues — a Data-Based Story	In-person Gathering	https://data.blog/2017/04/12/welcoming-new-colleagues-a-data-based-story/
BBC	How your space shapes the way you view remote work	Remote Experience - General	https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210218-how-your-space-shapes-the-way-you-view-remote-work
BBC	Why presenteeism wins out over productivity	Remote Productivity	https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210604-why-presenteeism-always-wins-out-over-productivity
Best Human Capital & Advisory Group	The Rise of the Remote Workforce: Benefits, Behaviors and Best Practices	Remote Experience - General	https://bhcagroup.com/remote-workforce
business.com	Does Working From Home Save Companies Money?	Future Trend	https://www.business.com/articles/working-from-home-save-money/
CNBC	Biggest risks in return to offices: Harvard remote work guru	Future Trend	https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/19/the-big-risks-in-return-to-office-harvard-remote-work-guru-.html
CNBC	The message Microsoft is sending to managers after a decline in team connectedness	Team Bonds	https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/microsoft-message-to-managers-after-decline-in-team-connections.html
CNBC	The message Microsoft is sending to managers after a decline in team connectedness	Team Bonds	https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/microsoft-message-to-managers-after-decline-in-team-connections.html
Deloitte	Belonging - From comfort to connection to contribution	Team Bonds	https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/creating-a-culture-of-belonging.html
Fast Company	The office is not dead. Here's why	Future Trend	https://www.fastcompany.com/90605978/the-office-is-not-dead-heres-why

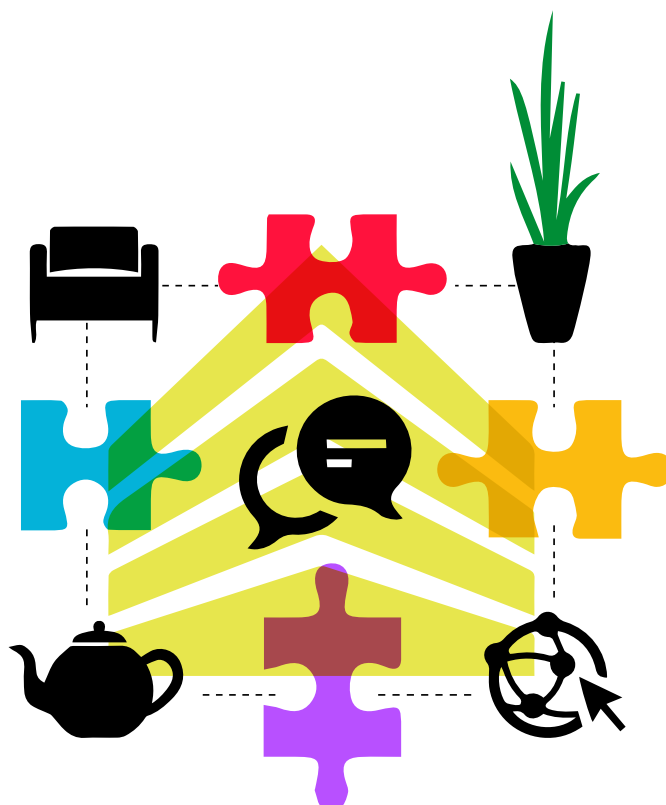| Source	Title	Categories/ Tags	URL
Fast Company	The Science Of When You Need In-Person Communication	In-person Gathering	https://www.fastcompany.com/3051518/the-science-of-when-you-need-in-person-communication
Feminist Frontiers	"Two hours extra for working from home": Reporting on gender, space, and time from the Covid-field of Delhi, India	Inclusivity	DOI:10.1111/gwao.12617
Flexjobs	How Often Should Your Remote Employees Meet Face-to-Face?	In-person Gathering	https://www.flexjobs.com/employer-blog/how-often-remote-employees-meet-face-to-face/
Flexjobs	Remote Work Helps FlexJobs Reduce Environmental Footprint, Save Financially, and Boost Productivity	Future Trend	https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/flexjobs-remote-savings/
Forbes	Mental Health And Remote Work: Survey Reveals 80% Of Workers Would Quit Their Jobs For This	Mental Health	https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2020/10/08/mental-health-leadership-survey-reveals-80-of-remote-workers-would-quit-their-jobs-for-this/?sh=64695c453a0f
Forbes	Mental Health And Remote Work: Survey Reveals 80% Of Workers Would Quit Their Jobs For This	Mental Health	https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2020/10/08/mental-health-leadership-survey-reveals-80-of-remote-workers-would-quit-their-jobs-for-this/?sh=64695c453a0f
Forbes	Moving From Work From Home To Work From Anywhere: Setting Up The Future Of Work For Success	Future Trend	https://www.forbes.com/sites/hvmacarthur/2021/04/01/moving-from-work-from-home-wfh-to-work-from-anywhere-wfa-setting-the-future-of-work-up-for-success/?sh=3f5d90ec7977
Forbes	The Future Of Work: 7 Trends And Tools You Need	Future Trend	https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinecomaford/2021/02/13/the-future-of-work-in-7-simple-steps-with-infographics/?sh=4e4405f9335a
Forbes	The Most Important Ways Companies Can Improve Work-Life Balance	Work-life Balance	https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliapeart/2020/11/06/the-most-important-ways-companies-can-improve-work-life-balance/?sh=3eaf6ada79a9
Gallup	Remote Work: Is It a Virtual Threat to Your Culture?	Orgnizational Culture; Remote Leadership	https://www.gallup.com/workplace/317753/remote-work-virtual-threat-culture.aspx
Gartner	Gartner Identifies Three Dimensions That Define The New Employer-Employee Relationship	Future Trend	https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-10-13-gartner-identifies-three-dimensions-that-define-the-new-employer-employee-relationship

Source	Title	Categories/Tags	URL
Gartner	Master a Distributed Workforce for Digital Transformation	Remote Experience - General	https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/master-a-distributed-workforce-for-digital-transformation/
GitLab	GitLab Meetups	In-person Gathering	https://about.gitlab.com/community/meetups/
GitLab	GitLab YouTube Channel	Remote Experience - General	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnMGQ8QHMAnVIsI3xJrihhg
Government of Canada	6 tips for staying connected as a team during COVID-19	Team Bonds	https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/nrcan/covid-coronavirus-nrcan-employee/working-nrcan-during-covid-19/6-tips-staying-connected-team-during-covid-19/22746
Government of Canada	Backgrounder: The "Right to Disconnect"	The Right to Disconnect	https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/labour-standards/consultation-right-to-disconnect-and-gig-work/backgrounder-right-to-disconnect.html
Greylock	What Workers Want	Employment Relations; Future Trend	https://greylock.com/greymatter/nicholas-bloom-stanford-what-workers-want/
Guardian	The empty office: what we lose when we work from home	Workplace Transformation	https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/jun/03/the-empty-office-what-we-lose-when-we-work-from-home
Harvard Business Review	Don't Let Employees Pick Their WFH Days	Employment Relations	https://hbr.org/2021/05/dont-let-employees-pick-their-wfh-days#?registration=success
Harvard Business Review	Managing Your WFH Paranoia	Remote Productivity; Mental Health; Team Bonds	https://hbr.org/2021/04/managing-your-wfh-paranoia
Havard Business Review	8 Ways to Manage Your Team While Social Distancing	Remote Experience - General	https://hbr.org/2020/03/8-ways-to-manage-your-team-while-social-distancing
Havard Business Review	Our Work-from-Anywhere Future	Future Trend	https://hbr.org/2020/11/our-work-from-anywhere-future
Human Resources Director	Why remote work doesn't work for everyone	Employment Engagement	https://www.hcamag.com/au/specialisation/employee-engagement/why-remote-work-doesnt-work-for-everyone/229638
Humanitarian Advisory Group	Remote Humanitarian Management and Programming	Remote Disaster Response	https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HH_PP_Guidance-Note_Remote-Management_electronic_FINAL.pdf
Inc.	Google's 3-Word Plan for Returning to Work is the Best I've Ever Seen	Remote Experience - General	https://www.inc.com/jason-aten/googles-3-word-plan-for-returning-to-work-is-best-ive-ever-seen.html

Source	Title	Categories/Tags	URL
Inc.	Remote Employees Face a Greater Risk of Burnout. Here's How You Can Help	Remote Communication; Mental Health	https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/remote-work-employees-burnout-zillow-founder-rich-barton.html
International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction	Digital Volunteers in Disaster Response: Accessibility Challenges	Remote Disaster Response	https://link-springer-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/
Kaiser Family Foundation	Both Remote and On-Site Workers are Grappling with Serious Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19	Mental Health	https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/both-remote-and-on-site-workers-are-grappling-with-serious-mental-health-consequences-of-covid-19/
McKinsey & Company	The future of work after COVID-19	Future Trend	https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19
Medium	The Five Levels of Remote Work — and why you're probably at Level 2	Remote Work Experience - General	https://medium.com/swlh/the-five-levels-of-remote-work-and-why-youre-probably-at-level-2-ccaf05a25b9c
Memory	4 of the best anti-distraction apps for deep work	Remote Productivity; Anti-distraction	https://memory.ai/timely-blog/anti-distraction-apps
Memory	Six remote technologies that are changing the way we work	Remote Work Infrastructures; Remote Communication; Remote Collaboration	https://memory.ai/timely-blog/remote-technologies
Microsoft	Hybrid Work: A Guide for Business Leaders	Remote Work Experience - General	https://clouddamcdnprodep.azureedge.net/gdc/gdcSwn4Qe/original
Microsoft	Returning to the Office During the COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: Early Indicators from China	Remote Experience - General	https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/uploads/prod/2021/03/WFH_CHI2021.pdf
New York Times	The Long, Unhappy History of Working From Home	Remote Experience - General	https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/technology/working-from-home-failure.html
Phase2	So You're Suddenly Working Remotely	Remote Communication; Remote Collaboration	https://www.phase2technology.com/blog/working-remote-best-practices
Pricewaterhouse Coopers	It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done	Future Trend	https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/us-remote-work-survey.html
Psychology Today	What are the top concerns of managers and workers	Mental Health	https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/202010/the-biggest-concerns-working-home-employees

Source	Title	Categories/ Tags	URL
Psychology Today	Pandemic-Related Burnout	Mental Health	https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202101/pandemic-related-burnout
Psychology Today	The Right to Disconnect	The Right to Disconnect	https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202106/the-right-disconnect
Psychology Today	Remote Work and the Psychology of Space	Mental Health; Workspace	https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202010/remote-work-and-the-psychology-space
Psychology Today	Burnout Is Real, On the Rise, and Retractable	Mental Health	https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202008/burnout-is-real-the-rise-and-retractable
Psychology Today	We Must Flatten the Curve—But This Time It's Our Mental Health	Mental Health	https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/202009/we-must-flatten-the-curve-time-its-our-mental-health
Society for Human Resource Management	Hybrid Work Model Likely to Be New Norm in 2021	Future Trend	https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/hybrid-work-model-likely-to-be-new-norm-in-2021.aspx
Society for Human Resource Management	Managing Workplace Mask Requirements as Restrictions Are Lifted	Workspace	https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/managing-workplace-mask-requirements-as-restrictions-are-lifted.aspx
Society for Human Resource Management	Study Finds Productivity Not Deterred by Shift to Remote Work	Remote Productivity	https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/study-productivity-shift-remote-work-covid-coronavirus.aspx
Strategic Management Journal	Work-from-anywhere: The productivity effects of geographic flexibility	Remote Productivity	https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/smj.3251
The Economist	How to lead from afar	Remote Leadership; Remote Experience - General	https://www.economist.com/business/2021/07/24/how-to-lead-from-afar
UN OCHA	Fostering the Right Workspace - Strategic Considerations for the Humanitarian Sector	Remote Disaster Response	https://app.box.com/s/
VOX	Many people don't want to work unless it's from home	Future Trend	https://www.vox.com/recode/22543409/remote-work-from-home-jobs-supply-demand-hiring-platforms

Source	Title	Categories/Tags	URL
Well and Good	5 Tips for Mastering the Virtual Walking Meeting To Refresh Your Brain and Boost Your Productivity	Remote Communication	wellandgood.com/virtual-walking-meeting/
WIRED	One Startup's Solution for Zoom Fatigue? The Walk and Talk	Remote Communication	https://www.wired.com/story/spot-walking-meetings-startup-solution-for-zoom-fatigue/
Zapier	Zapier's guide to working remotely	Remote Work Guide; Meeting Hygiene; Remote Work Culture	https://zapier.com/learn/remote-work/
Zapier	5 tips for communicating on a remote team	Remote Communication	https://zapier.com/blog/remote-work-communication/
Zapier	Suddenly Remote Starter Kit	Remote Communication; Remote Collaboration; Meeting Hygiene	https://go.zapier.com/suddenly-remote-ebook/pdf/
ZDNet	Microsoft revealed the latest truths about working from home. One is truly disturbing	Employment Relations; Future Trend	https://www.zdnet.com/article/microsoft-revealed-the-latest-truths-about-working-from-home-one-is-truly-disturbing/

Annex: Strategy Checkbox

■ ■ ■

Remote Organizations	Checkbox
Written Communication	
Functions of Messaging Tools	✓
Searchable Conversation	✓
Rules on the Use of Email/Loose Template	✓
Online Collaboration Platforms/Cloud Services	✓
Flat Communication Structure	✓
"Four W" Questions Rules	◉
Clear Message to the Right Person	◉
Plans for Limited Communication	◉
Same Level of Tech Literacy	
List of Glossaries	
Accessibility	◉
Video Communication	
Meeting as the Last Resort	✓
Transparent Schedules	✓
Attach Agendas	✓
Rules of Engagement	✓
Inclusivity in Meetings	✓
Meeting Documentation	✓
Meeting Frequencies	✓
Meetings with In-country Responders	
Sense of Purpose	◉
Audio Communication	
Considerations for Walking Meetings	◉
Indoor Walking Meeting Alternatives	◉

Productivity and Efficiency (vertical label, left side)

	Remote Organizations	Checkbox
Productivity and Efficiency	**Strategies**	
	Informal Conversations	✓
	Team Trust	✓
	Update Expectation & Work Flexibility	✓
	Clear Function Distribution	✓
	Clear Team Set-up	✓
	A Culture of Recognition	✓
	Infrastructure Policies	✓
	Accomodations	✓
Health and Wellness	**Work-life Balance**	
	Team Cultures and Norms around Expectation	✓
	Discourage Unwanted Behaviours	✓
	Validate Stories in Heads	✓
	Be Cautious About the Right to Disconnect	✓
	Five Self-reflective Questions	⊙
Team Bonds	**Strategies**	
	Health & Wellness Resources	✓
	"Empathy" Team	⊙
	Buddy Program	
	Psychological First-aid Training	
	Relaxation Techniques	⊙
	A Culture Around Mental Health	✓
	Encourage Healthy Behaviours	✓
	Other Policies	⊙
	Strategies	
	Milestones and Sense of Belonging	✓
	Design the Non-work Channels	✓
	"Fun" Virtual Activities	⊙
	In-person Gathering	✓

✓ = Required
⊙ = Consider
Empty = not applicable