

COLLABORATION

# How to Collaborate Effectively If Your Team Is Remote

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Remote communication isn't always easy. Do you recognize yourself in any of these examples?

*At 10 p.m., a corporate lawyer gets a text from a colleague and wonders (not for the first time) if there's a protocol about work-related texts after a certain hour.*

*After a long and liquid client dinner, an advertising executive opens an email from his boss reminding him to submit his expenses on time. Annoyed by this micromanagement, he immediately responds with his uncensored thoughts.*

*On the weekly team conference call, a remote team member is confused about whether her colleague is really "on mute" when she delays a response to a question or if she's just not paying attention and is using this as an excuse.*

When it's possible to be set off by a phone's mute button, it's safe to say that we're living in challenging times. The digital era has ushered in a revolution in communication that's equivalent to the one surrounding the

invention of the [printing press](#). It's changing how we speak — often in bullet points. And it's affecting what we hear, as the jumble of information coming at us can lead to frequent [misunderstandings and confusion](#).

People who work on remote teams face these challenges consistently. According to recent [estimates](#) from Gallup and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 22% of Americans work from home, while nearly 50% are involved with remote or virtual team work. This [continuing shift](#) calls for a new range of behaviors and skills.

Why do remote teams demand new collaboration skills? What's missing from our texts, emails, conference calls, and other digital communications? Body language. Even when we're co-located, the tone of a text or the formality of an email is left wide open to interpretation, to the point that [even our closest friends get confused](#). These misinterpretations create an anxiety that can become costly, affecting morale, engagement, productivity, and innovation.

Remote communication can distort the normal pace of our conversations. The delay between our messages can often postpone or hide emotional reactions to our comments. How many times have you written an email and, immediately after hitting *send*, felt concerned about how it would land? Would your boss see your late night email and consider it to be an intrusion on her private time? Would she tell you if it was? While we may have become used to these types of asynchronous interactions, they can still conflict with our normal rules for social interaction. Lacking an immediate response, we can become distracted, second-guess ourselves, or even grow frustrated with our teams.

To perform at the highest levels, remote teams have to find new and better ways to operate.

First, consider that there are [three kinds of distance](#) in remote collaboration: *physical* (place and time), *operational* (team size, bandwidth and skill levels) and *affinity* (values, trust, and interdependency). The best way for managers to drive team performance is by focusing on reducing [affinity distance](#). Try switching most remote communication to regular video calls, which are a much better vehicle for establishing rapport and creating empathy than either e-mails or voice calls. And design virtual team-building rituals that give people the opportunity to interact regularly and experience their collaboration skills in action.

When remote teams communicate well and leverage their strengths, they can actually gain an advantage over co-located teams. Here are some best practices to master:

**Don't conflate brief communications and clear communications:** In our efforts to be efficient, we sometimes use fewer words to communicate. But such brevity can mean that the rest of the team wastes time trying to interpret your messages. (And then misinterprets them anyway.) Don't assume that others understand your cues and shorthand. Spend the time to communicate with the intention of being ultra clear, no matter the medium. Indeed, you can never be *too* clear, but it is too easy to be less clear than you should.

**Don't bombard your team with messages:** Do you follow up on a task by email, text *and* phone? Do you tend to ask people if they got your previous message? Abusing those access points can be a form of digital dominance, a relentless and uncomfortable form of harassment. The medium you choose creates different demands on the time of the receiver. Using all of them for the same message is ineffective (as well as annoying). Choose your digital volume wisely.

**Establish communication norms:** Remote teams need to create new norms that establish clarity in communication. Companies such as Merck have created acronyms for their digital communications like "Four Hour Response (4HR)" and "No Need to Respond (NNTR)" that bring predictability and certainty to virtual conversations. Individual teams can also establish their own norms — e.g., to use or not use Slack, Google Docs, or Whatsapp groups. And norms can also exist on an individual level, such as people's preferred response

time, writing style, and tone. For example, some individuals prefer short and quick messages, while others favor lengthy and detailed responses; people also differ in their preference and tolerance for humor and informality.

While we often tend to regard human predictability as a defect, few qualities are more sought-after at work, especially in virtual collaborations. We are all unique, but our consistent behaviors help others predict what we do, and in turn help them to understand us — and we all benefit from being understood. You can make that easier for others by establishing a clear personal etiquette and sticking to it consistently.

**See the hidden opportunities in written communications:** Being behind a screen can create new opportunities for certain team members, making space for those who might be less inclined to speak out in groups. Text-based communication places less importance on interpersonal skills and physical appearance, offering an effective way to share power and decision-making. [Research](#) shows that introverted individuals are less inhibited in online versus offline interactions. However, you need to watch out for *virtual unconscious bias*, where punctuation, grammar and word choice might reveal prejudiced attitudes towards certain groups.

And the absence of body language doesn't necessarily mean that we're not giving away more than we intend to when we communicate remotely. There's still a great deal of meta-communication and virtual leakage that happens in digital environments, and it only takes paying attention to read between the lines. For example, the use of exclamation marks or a negative emoji after referring to someone's gender, nationality, or religion is as powerful a marker of disapproval as a disgusted face.

**Create intentional space for celebration:** Old school birthday cakes are still important for remote teams. Creating virtual spaces and rituals for celebrations and socializing can strengthen relationships and lay the foundation for future collaboration. Find ways to shorten the affinity distance. One company we worked with celebrated new talent by creating a personal emoji for each employee who had been there for six months. You can find your own unique way to create team spaces for social connection. How you do it is less important than whether you do.

As more and more of our interactions happen digitally, we will continue to experience new forms of miscommunication and misunderstanding. The solution will not come from new technologies (although, no doubt, developers will keep trying to bridge that gap). Instead, the solution is in understanding the new rules of engagement; in building a communication skill set that reflects the demands of our digitally-driven age.



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