The Flock Guide to

Building Great Remote Teams

+ 13 pro tips to help you get results from day one!

- ⊙ Does 'remote work' really work?
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flock

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Does remote work really... work?

Remote work sounds like the solution for every geographically-independent startup, and why wouldn't it be? The overhead costs associated with occupying corporate real estate such as rents, mortgages and security deposits are virtually nonexistent (pun intended).

Remote teams also benefit from a more diverse applicant pool as they are able to broaden their search for qualified candidates beyond their geographical location. Employees are able to incorporate work into their lifestyles and not necessarily the other way around, and this certainly helps in enhancing employee happiness and reducing attrition.

A study of 8000 global employees and employers indicates that many companies agree: **3 out of every 4 companies have adopted flexible working options.**

Remote work is good for business

Think remote employees are just chilling at home in sweatpants? Think again.

A 2-year study of 500 employees at Ctrip, China's largest travel agency, by Stanford economist Nicholas Bloom found that remote work improved employee productivity by 13%! It also reduced employee attrition by 50% and saved the company almost $2000 per employee on rent alone!

On the other side of the world, Aetna - the American insurance giant - saved $78 million by shedding 2.7 million square feet of office space, thanks to remote work programs. It doesn't hurt that the flexibility of remote work is a catalyst for employee happiness and creativity.

So, yes, when you have the right processes in place, remote work works.

Let's discuss what it takes to get these right processes in place.

PRO TIP #1
With the right systems in place, remote work can reduce company expenses related to real estate and improve employee happiness. Happier employees, in turn, lead to a more pleasant, more productive, and more profitable environment for the company.

Is remote work right for your business?

By now, you're probably itching to reexamine your business operations and realize the benefits of remote work. But before you schedule an impromptu board meeting to discuss the overhaul, you must ask yourself: **Is going remote the best move for my business?**

Not all jobs in an office are conducive to being handled remotely. Some key positions might require the employee to be on call at an office, so it is important that you take a deeper look at your org chart and figure out which roles can be accomplished remotely.

Is my business model suited for a remote work setup?

Remote work is well-suited for fields like information technology, marketing, customer service, and mobile app development. According to Remoters.net, 29.2% of remote jobs posted on their site are for technology roles, followed by marketing roles which make up 24.5% of all remote jobs posted. However, there are components of any business that may benefit from remote work.

Consider, for example, the following:

- **Most businesses have at least one role that can be performed remotely**.
  Even coffee shop owners may find it useful to conduct meetings and training sessions remotely, without having to commute to each location.

- **Adapting certain components of your business to remote work can save you time, money, and resources**.
  Continuing with our coffee shop example, such a geographically-restricted company can also consider outsourcing digitally-oriented work to contractors or businesses that work remotely. Think of tasks like social media management or even payroll and accounting. When baristas aren't busy with administrative tasks, they can focus on doing what they do best — make great coffee for customers!

Obviously, the remote work model does not work for every business.

For example, geographically-dependent businesses are very limited with remote work options. Think about it - would you expect your barista to deliver you a cup of coffee through your computer?

What do remote employees attribute their success to?

- [Maria Margarida](#) is a Product Designer at Drover and attributes her success within a remote team to open communication, thorough documentation, picking the right tools, organizational transparency, and a healthy work-life balance.

- [Joe Tullio](#) managed a small, distributed UX team at Google and attributed their success to effective meetings, proper utilization of design collaboration tools, freedom of mobility, and a solid, supportive work culture.

Both perspectives overlap on **effective communication, structured meetings, and the right tools**. While Maria focuses her discussion on achieving a healthy work-life balance, the manager's perspective offered by Joe emphasizes that important element as well, but on a larger, organizational scale.

Start by identifying jobs that cannot be remote

Identifying roles within the organization that are not remote-friendly will be very useful in the long run, especially in setting expectations with your team. This also helps job applicants know whether the role they apply to is remote or not.

> **PRO TIP #2**
> Not all roles in your team are remote-friendly. If you're building a hybrid team with a few members working remotely, you may want your "Homefront Heroes" to be physically available at a location, at least in the first few months. If something goes wrong, they are there and they're on it.

Let potential employees know what to expect

Making this information (which roles are remote and which aren't) available to your prospective applicants helps them make necessary adjustments to accommodate potentially being hired by you. It shows that your company is serious about clear, unambiguous communication and tells them, "*We will communicate openly with you and, if you are hired, we will expect the same from you.*"

Next, identify jobs that are remote-friendly

When you begin optimizing your business model for a remote work model and once you've identified core roles that won't be remote, it's time to take a look at your current roster of creative/design projects and find areas of opportunity for hiring remote team members for these roles and projects.

Creative jobs and projects that need a fair amount of autonomy are perfect for remote work. Typically, these jobs do not require a significant degree of micromanagement and oversight, as long as deadlines are met and the project progresses in a manner that is in the best interests of both the creative worker and the company.

PRO TIP #3
Key players in many modern, tech-savvy businesses such as designers, data analysts, content strategists, copywriters, graphics designers, and virtual assistants (VAs) are all roles that are remote-friendly.

Will my business go 'all-in' and be 100% remote or will we keep an office?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. Instead, you should consider both options, and examine why one or the other (or some combination of the two) is going to be best for your business.

A lot of business owners fall into the trap of thinking that they MUST go all or nothing when it comes to 'going remote'. While there are pros and cons to both options - being an in-office team or a fully remote one - businesses usually prefer one over the other. However, some businesses find that a combination of the two works well for them: transitioning some functions and roles to a remote work model while others work from the office.

Go slow and steady

Taking a slow, phased approach to adopting a remote work model has several benefits. For existing businesses, a slow transition allows employees the opportunity to prepare their mindset and lifestyle for remote work.

Keep in mind that transitioning to a remote work model creates challenges for both employers and employees. For many employees, these challenges may call for sharp personal accountability adjustments like acclimating to new deadlines, the incorporation of progress benchmarks, and regular required meetings.

Agorapulse successfully transitioned to a semi-remote work model in 2017. The company now has offices in France and Argentina, and remote workers in other parts of the world including the United States, Ireland, Mexico, Slovakia, and Brazil. They embraced the learning opportunities that came with hiring remotely and found a diverse pool of qualified candidates much sooner than they thought.

As a business owner or manager, keep in mind that transitioning to remote work is harder for established businesses than startups. It has been done before, of course, but adapting existing processes and infrastructure to a remote work model is trickier. Also, remember that team members have to make adjustments to the way they work together. Adapting to remote work staples like daily/weekly meetings via video conferences, more stringent deadlines, and more self-reliance on task delegation requires buy-in from your team.

Some teams, like Buffer, operate completely remote businesses but give employees an option to work from a co-working space (paid for by the company). These are all variables that your remote work policy can help define.

"All-in"... but don't FOLD!

On the other hand, Groove decided to go "all-in" with remote work. They closed their office and forced all staff to go remote. Why? Because they believed that a "mixed" team with some remote and some on-site employees would always feel like there were two different classes of employees within the organization.

Compare your business dynamics to those of Agorapulse and Groove.

What factors stand out to you, that would facilitate or hinder you going all-in on remote work?

Making it work...
Hiring your remote team

So far, we've identified what jobs won't work, what jobs will work with a remote staff implementation, and how exactly to go about implementing a remote work model. We deep dived into whether or not you should transition your entire business to a remote work model, and whether that transition should take place all at once with all chips in, or whether a slow transition would be more strategic for you. Finally, we've identified what that model looks like for you business. Let's now shift our focus to getting the right people in place...

Should I contract freelancers or should I hire remote employees?

First, know the difference and what each option means for your business. At the surface level, the primary difference between a contract freelancer and an employee lies in, of course, money and taxes.

- Having contractors eliminates the need to pay Social Security, medical, and federal and state unemployment taxes, but there are strict guidelines that determine who can be classified as a contractor. Contractors are required to supply their own working tools and job materials, set their own hours, and they have overall authority over the work being done. With contractors, when the work is done, the contractor is free to leave.

- Hiring employees comes with its own brand of complexity. Employees can either be paid hourly or by salary and are reliant upon you, the business owner, to manage proper tax withholding and the appropriate employment taxes discussed above. You have more control over the nature of the work assigned and can manage employees' workflows.

More and more businesses are transitioning to contracted labor to get work done, as they seek to outsource components of their businesses to professional companies specializing in those particular needs. Some hospitals outsource their transportation needs to third-party courier companies. Many stores outsource their inventory services to third- party inventory companies. This 'divide-and-conquer' style approach allows companies to ensure their needs are met on a department- by- department basis by letting those best qualified to manage those departments run the show. This allows the organization as a whole to focus on more important responsibilities, like generating profits.

What aspects of your business are best managed by an outside authority? Say your company specializes in content creation for tech startups but you find yourself spending countless hours editing and proofreading documents. Contracting out editing services to a professional editing company would give you more time to chase new prospects and increase your output to existing clients.

Here is an exercise to help you identify areas of opportunity (roles that can be contracted out) and how a remote work model can meet those needs:

1. **Organize** and list all projects your team is actively working on. Include projects you just started work on as well as those nearing the finish line.

2. **Determine** which components of those projects consume most of your time and what tasks related to those components can be handled to your satisfaction by a specialized company or a freelancer.

3. **Calculate** your savings. Will investing in specialized third-party collaborators help you save time and money in the long run? How much?

4. **Identify** freelancers or third-party services that can handle the work for you. Establish a contract agreement to get those project components off your plate!

EXPERT SPOTLIGHT

Christopher Aborqui of Light the Way Bookkeeping is familiar with the intricacies of remote work as his company serves the bookkeeping needs of freelance writers and contractors. When considering a remote work model, Christopher sees it as a strategic solution for new businesses to help offset cash flow problems.

"When the business is growing, a lot of the time owners will think it's time to expand. Business might be good now, but there are always ups and downs. Expanding too soon could leave the business in a serious hole. By adopting a remote work model, you're saving on the amount of space and equipment your business needs to operate. There are no extra desks, computers, or laptops to buy. No extra phone lines to install or office supplies to stock up on."

Hiring your first remote employees

Remote work comes with renewed challenges such as coordinating a team spread across time zones, ensuring each milestone gets completed in time, and catching communication breakdowns before they escalate. But this guide isn't intended to scare you away or paralyze you into inaction. Rather, it offers a realistic look at how going remote can be beneficial to your business and walks you through putting all pieces of the puzzle together so you can realize those benefits.

The foundation of an effective remote team is the trust team members have in each other to get things done without someone looming over their shoulders, so you need to focus on hiring the right people. One wrong hire can drive your newly-remote team into the ground. *On the other hand, the right remote hires will drive your business to profitability and next-level productivity, and these are the rockstars you want to hire.*

Once you consider a remote work model for your business and say yes, here's how you can identify, hire, and onboard remote employees.

When sourcing candidates, think of less conventional places where you can find new talent.

Think beyond LinkedIn or Indeed. Where do people meet to bounce off ideas on shared interests? Are they sharing their development projects on GitHub? Are they solving technical challenges on Kaggle? Showcasing their creative work on Dribble or Behance? Answering threads of questions in the Google Advertising community? Identifying great talent is easier when you have proof of their skills and work!

While this may be true for in-office hiring as well, it is especially beneficial for hiring remote employees because it allows you to see a candidate's work competencies at play. **What is the quality of their work? Are they responsive to queries and comments? How do they engage with other members of these communities?** Many of your potential interview questions will already be answered through keen observation of what is already out there.

Your candidate has already addressed your questions. You just have to look for the answers.

PRO TIP #4

AngelList is a good option if you're looking for startup-minded talent. You can also look into your own user base (sending a "Hey, we're hiring!" link in emails to customers and blog readers gets Zapier dozens of daily applicants!), local meetup groups, or personal networks. The right candidate might be just a few clicks away!

4 signs of a great remote employee

There are plenty of traits to look for when making just about any hire. But to hire remote employees that truly excel, some characteristics are especially critical.

1. **They're not just skilled, they're experts in their fields**. In an increasingly competitive global economy, finding people who can perform highly specialized tasks can be difficult. With so much talent available globally, remote hiring creates a unique opportunity for companies to reach individuals with specific or targeted skill sets.

2. **They can perform on the job without external motivation**. Obviously, the rigors of an office environment - tracking work hours, observing employee dynamics, etc. - don't quite apply to a remote team. So the ability to organize and stay motivated in the absence of external guidance/ incentive becomes a critical requirement in a remote employee. As GitHub puts it, the ideal remote employee is "self-motivated enough to stay productive without someone looking over their shoulder and checking up on them all the time."

3. **They're as great at listening as they are at talking.** Word has it that software engineers are introverted, but you'd be surprised to learn how many creative career professionals are actually introverts - from salespeople to social media managers! In a remote hire, communication skills should be evaluated by more than the ability to talk or the count of project updates shared. Great communicators are proactive and empathetic, they express themselves clearly, and make sure their message is understood. They also have fantastic interpersonal and listening skills that must be assessed from the start.

4. **They are more productive when they focus on results, not procedures.** Remote team members naturally have less visibility into operational procedures and how they come to be. So it is critical that remote employees keep their eye on the ball and focus first and foremost on achieving business goals.

"We are results-oriented by necessity," say the folks over at FlexJobs. Even Toggl, a remote team behind the fantastic time tracking app, says that they have a "result-oriented culture and everyone's productivity is measured by their results." While they do track hours put in by everyone, productivity is measured based on the results and not on hours worked.

PRO TIP #5

Studies show that remote workers are happier than their cubicle-bound peers. Happy employees are productive employees.

Ensure a successful start to your remote hiring by doing THIS.

So you know what to look for in a great remote employee, but what about your hiring process? Hiring remotely also involves adapting your hiring process to the realities of remote employees.

Set clear expectations before you even start interviewing

Hiring remote staff can be a great opportunity to enhance the culture of your company workforce, increase diversity and encourage growth for both your company and your staff. But this can only happen when realistic expectations are set from the start and communication is a two-way process.

Be straightforward with your candidates. Hubstaff does this by kick-starting the conversation straight from their hiring ad. They directly ask candidates if they can work hours that overlap with specific time zones, or whether they are okay with tracking their time and sending a status update via email at the end of each day. Including a mini-questionnaire inside your ad increases your chances of finding applicants that match your expectations.
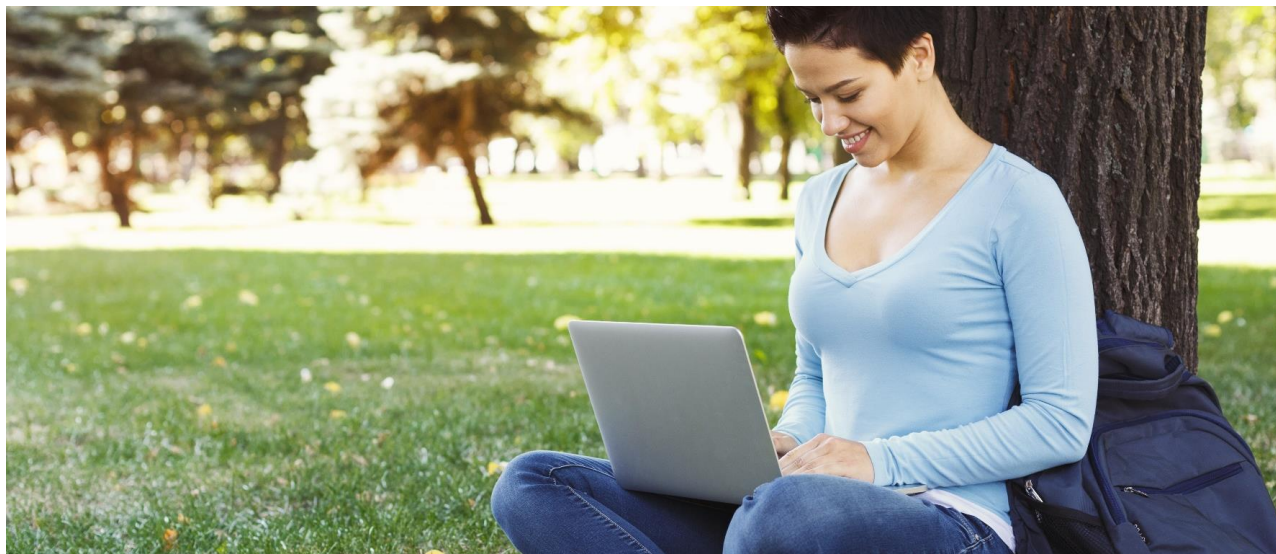
> ☑ **PRO TIP #6**
> Build strong personal connections even when hiring remote employees.

Instead of asking "What were the biggest challenges you faced at your previous job and how did you overcome them?" Skillcrush prefers questions like "How do you schedule your workday?" or "What communication tools do you use in different situations?"

Try to steer clear of routine questions that can lead to prepared answers when you evaluate skill and cultural fit. This helps you spend zero time on candidates that are not a good fit, and it sets accurate expectations about your team culture and hiring process.

Buffer does a great job at this - once they narrow down the list of candidates they believe are a good fit, they go through not one but three interviews. The first aims to assess whether the candidate is aligned with the culture and values of the company. The second interview is more role-specific as it is meant to evaluate the candidate's experience. The last one is to assess the candidate's critical thinking and empathy skills.

Application for Marketing Generalist Position

What is your name? *

What is your email address? *

Please post your LinkedIn Profile URL *

Please post a link to your resume

Do you have any references we can speak with?
If yes, please list their email(s) below

Do you have a portfolio or examples we can look at?
If yes, please post a URL or Dropbox link below

We work as a team and are available via group chat while working. It is important to have worked in a team-based setting before and being open to discussion and debate. Is this OK? *

○ Yes

○ No

Each team member uses Hubstaff to track their time and sends a status update via email at the end of each day. Is this OK? *

○ Yes

○ No

Will this be the only project you are working on? *

○ Yes

○ No

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Hubstaff's questionnaire for a Marketing Generalist role

Yonder recommends live video interviews so both parties can get a feel for one another. Video calling is also a good way to tell if the candidate is familiar with video conference software, acts professionally, and is flexible to meet on a different time zone.

Revisit your testing methods when evaluating remote employee skills

A test project is the best way to tell a good profile from a great fit. Since remote hiring makes it difficult to test candidates in a controlled office environment, third-party software and services can help.

Formstack asks candidates to complete a small on-the-job task to evaluate actual work, creativity, and ability to solve problems. When hiring developers, X-team prefers to use their own tests "rather than use a third-party service like HackerRank or Codility."

But testing doesn't always have to be about a score or getting some sort of useable output, says Baremetrics. "It's about figuring out if they can hit the deadlines they set, if they're actually able to do the caliber of work they've shown before, and if they respond well to criticism."

> **PRO TIP #7**
> Perform a reference check to get insight into work experience and personality traits.

Reference checks still carry a lot of weight. For example, GitLab dropped all test projects in favor of reference calls.

Before making an offer, Zapier sends out an anonymous survey using SkillSurvey. Though this adds length to the hiring process, it helps to get honest feedback on candidates from references.

Onboarding new remote hires to set them up for success

Onboarding can make or break the success of a new remote hire. Which is why even remote companies with effective onboarding systems are constantly looking for ways to improve them.

For example, until recently, a new hire at Buffer went through a 45-day [bootcamp](#) to give both the employee and the employer time to ensure that they were a great fit. This system worked well but feedback from teammates showed that it did not create the best environment for folks to do their best work. [Buffer's new philosophy](#) is that a new teammate is "a full teammate from Day 1" in an effort to make a new hire's first few weeks feel more like "an encouraging welcome instead of a 45-day period of auditioning."

There are many ways to introduce a new team member, from a company-wide video call to an introduction via email or chat. [Trello](#) takes a "lean" approach to introductions by assigning specific peer mentors to new members of the team. Mentors are the ones who help new hires meet other employees and send out introductory emails to the company.

> ☑ **PRO TIP #8**
> Find the best way to introduce new remote employees to the team and projects.

Whatever way you choose to manage how new team members are introduced, make sure to alleviate anxiety by clearly defining roles and assignments, and showing new members where to turn for help.

Make sure goals and timelines are clear from day one

"Leave nothing to the imagination," says Johnathan Solorzano of Solo Media Group. Setting clear, achievable goals during onboarding will inspire a sense of mission and purpose in your new remote employees.

"...the chain of command should be communicated clearly and effectively," thinks Vincenzo Villamena of Online Taxman.

There is no better time to communicate company values, objectives, goals and timelines than during onboarding. When remote employees have clarity on their tasks in terms of timelines and expected outcomes, they are more productive. As Upworthy co-founder Peter Koechley puts it, make people thrive by giving them "a clear, meaningful mission".

PRO TIP #9
Anticipate and mitigate personal challenges by allowing flexible work schedules.

In a distributed team, you really have to plan for flexibility. Buffer accommodates time zone differences by communicating "as asynchronously as possible" using email, Discourse, or starting a project in Dropbox Paper, instead of using a team chat tool all the time. They also change up meeting times so that they are available to people across time zones.

Derek Robinson at Top Notch Dezigns notes that "when you pay attention to your remote worker's time zone, it's a clear sign of solidarity. He or she is bound to remember the gesture and will reciprocate in other ways."

Make it super easy for new teammates to be a part of the community

Regular video conversations and occasional in-person events are important to establish a sense of community at Online Taxman, but they may not work for every team.

Find what works for your team - it can be company retreats every 6 months like the ones at Zapier, or the messaging equivalent of water cooler conversations. During onboarding, take time to set standards for communication and make sure no one gets left out of social conversations within the team.

Be open about business performance indicators to create a culture of transparency

Hotjar creates a culture of trust by opening up their monthly leadership calls for any team member to join. The company's financials are accessible to everyone in the team and people are encouraged to discuss anything with the entire team.

Buffer takes it to the next level - employees know each other's salaries, what projects other teams are working on, and have access to monthly investor reports and financial updates.

Use Objectives and Key Results (OKR) to align your teams around goals and results, by giving employees visibility into what others are working on. Many companies including Spotify, Piktochart, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Airbnb are finding success using OKRs.

PRO TIP #10

A remote team is only as good as the process you use to put it together.

Hiring remotely is a great way to grow your business without trading efficiency and flexibility. It is also the key to building a more engaged and productive team. Invest time and effort into designing a robust remote hiring process and you will find it will become the secret ingredient to your business success.

Maximize your remote team's productivity

Ultimately, you're asking team members to set their own pace and cultivate some working habits that they may not be used to. Here are a few initial ways to navigate this process:

- **Start with small tasks and virtual meetings** to help your team get used to working together virtually.

- **Give them time to acclimatize to the 'new normal'** - remember that not every employee has the same learning curve.

- **Be patient and take notes**; It is important to have a clear understanding of what works and what needs improving as your team transitions to a remote work model.

We looked at dozens of successful remote teams to understand how best to do it. They set clear goals, measure the right metrics, engage their people, foster accountability, and build trust through transparency. You can do it too! Here are some essentials:

OKRs, a goal system every remote manager needs

Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) is a system to create alignment and engagement around measurable goals. Objectives are your desired goals and the key results are measurable ways to track progress towards achieving goals. John Doerr, the venture capitalist who introduced Google to OKRs, described them best - I will (Objective) as measured by (this set of Key Results).

OKRs are public within the organization, so employees can see what their co-workers are working on. The likes of Google, Spotify, Walmart, and ING Bank use OKRs to set and achieve goals. So do remote teams such as Piktochart, Buffer, Coworker, and yours truly.

Learn more about setting measurable goals using OKRs.

Keep your projects on track with Jira, Trello or Asana

Now that you have your OKRs, it's time to get cracking on those goals. But how do you manage projects in a remote team where people work different hours and the majority of communication happens asynchronously? The answer, unsurprisingly, is technology.

Modern tools such as Jira, Trello, and Asana make it easy for teams, remote or not, to work together on projects with hundreds of moving parts. For example, Wyeworks uses Trello to conduct sprint retrospectives for their remote team and they are in love with its simplicity and flexibility.

Closer to home, we use a mix of flock's Shared To-dos and Trello to manage day-to-day tasks within channels and cross-functional projects respectively. Not only does this help us be more transparent within the team about "who is working on what", but it also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability.

> *"I have faith that my staff will get things done, as everyone is in charge of their own projects, and if they don't get (them) done, there will be accountability. Once people are aware of their responsibilities, they are pretty much left to their own devices. However, we do keep tasks up to date with to-do lists, especially as we do lots of funding requests. When a new one comes in, someone puts their name to it and we'll know when it's due. This is a helpful way of tracking and assigning responsibility."*
>
> *— Alexi Breton Regional Manager at Cco.coop*

Measure the right metrics to drive performance, not hours

Replace the flawed "hours at work" model of productivity measurement with result-oriented performance analytics based on goals.

For example, at Flock, we measure performance using metrics relevant to each employee's job - NPS, leads generated, bugs fixed, churn arrested etc.

Performance analytics done right helps every team, remote or not. To skyrocket your remote team's productivity, you should:

- **Measure the output of team members working on similar projects and tasks to calculate median values for good performance**. Essentially, you are A/B testing your employees' output to benchmark performance goals.

- **Set fair deadlines for specific tasks and track how long it takes to complete them to measure productivity with more clarity**. A team member missing deadlines a little too often? Talk to them to see how you can help.

- **Look to achieve goals on different levels, from small wins to reviewing the overall bigger picture**. If a project will take a few months, it's good to break it down into smaller sections, set weekly objectives and achieve a specific number of goals each week.

Balance engagement and freedom within your team

Communication is essential in any remote team but you need to strike the right balance. Spend too much time on calls with your team, and they will begin to feel micromanaged and become disinterested. Spend too little, however, and they may feel like they have been left out.

EXPERT SPOTLIGHT

Zack Miller of Hatch, a US-based company providing supportive services to both startups and veteran businesses alike, encourages businesses to adopt the remote work model but emphasizes the importance of strong communication in making it successful.

"Have a clear understanding of what you want and ensure that those working on the projects clearly grasp what the task at hand is and make it easy for them to communicate with you when they have questions. If someone wants to work remotely, even if that is at home or a coffee shop, give them the autonomy to do so and test whether they continue to be as productive. If they sway one way or the other, address it. Communication is key, if you think that just because they are miles away you do not have to communicate, you are wrong."

- Start each day with a standup meeting - like Zapier does - where everyone lists one or two tasks they are working on. This level of transparency means that everyone in the team knows 'who is working on what' and that makes them feel more involved.

- Use team chat to bring your team together. Encourage the use of team chat tools to quickly discuss ideas and tasks. Organize group video calls at least once a month to 'just talk' and address non-work related challenges that team members can help each other with.

- Trust is what successful remote teams run on and a little effort goes a long way. When team members feel like they can approach you or a colleague about their challenges - even the small ones - they feel empowered, which leads to better working relationships, less micromanaging and a more motivated team.

"You want to avoid micromanaging at all costs when working in a fast-growing company that operates in the tech industry. My goal is to find how and where my employees add the most value, which I believe is hard to do when you create a list of small specific tasks and stay on top of them. It's important to be clear about the company's overall goals, what we are working on and why we are doing it. I'm clear on why certain decisions are taken in relation to the goals we set, and If people understand the global path, they will have enough information to work independently and at a higher level in their field."

— Sunny Paris CEO of noCRM.io

How noCRM and Buffer engage their remote teams

Lead management software company noCRm uses a "3 Goals a Day" system, where each team member shares three things they are working on for the day. These don't have to be major projects—its purpose is to show team members smaller goals each employee wants to accomplish within the day. Buffer goes a step further with daily pair calls that help remote employees connect and build friendships while also discussing work.

> ☑ **PRO TIP #11**
> The secret to building a highly motivated and productive remote team is communication, trust, and transparency.

Remote teams that are more engaged and where team members are trusted to complete their work are happier doing it. Encouraging transparency and accountability using goal-setting and project management systems helps build a remote workplace that is more connected, informed, and productive.

Proactively address your remote team's challenges

Remote work is a gamechanger, but because it's such a unique way of working, its challenges, too, are unique. Stay ahead of those growth opportunities and you'll be well on your way to building a productive, happy, and healthy remote team that grows your business.

All remote work setups — whether they're of teams working remotely from different offices or of employees working from their homes — face very specific challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed. We look at three such challenges that every remote team faces and how to address them.

Overcoming "virtual distance"

Dr. Karen Sobel-Lojeski, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Technology and Society at Stony Brook University, describes virtual distance as a sense of psychological and emotional detachment that begins to grow unconsciously when most encounters/ experiences are mediated by screens/ technology. Not so surprisingly, this is an increasingly common form of disconnect in distributed and remote teams.

Dr. Karen and her colleagues measured and analyzed virtual distance in teams around the world. Their data shows that, if left uncontrolled, high virtual distance can have adverse effects on business:

- Innovative behaviors fall by over 90%

- Trust declines by over 80%

- Cooperative and helping behaviors go down by over 80%

- Role and goal clarity decline by 75%

- Project success drops by over 50%

- Organizational commitment and satisfaction decline by more than 50%

The virtual distance model is made up of three factors: affinity distance, physical distance, and operational distance.

Affinity virtual distance is the distance that people from different cultural sensibilities face when communicating and interpreting messages (among other things). In a remote team, this type of virtual distance is the most damaging because these teams are often multicultural and their different ethnicities and values can cause gaps in communications.

Here's an example of a non-serious slip up caused by affinity virtual distance:

Ricardo Fernandez manages a remote team of 30 people from 10 different nationalities at Prodigy Finance. He recalls how one of his teammates from South Africa told him that he'll call him "*just now!*" Fernandez, all excited for the call, waited, waited, and waited for the call to happen. When his coworker didn't call in the next 15 minutes, Fernandez checked in with him. This coworker again said that he'll just make a call. But this time, he sent Fernandez a graphic of what "just now" meant for South Africans:

South African time expression

Present time → Future

Right now | Now | Now Now | Just Now
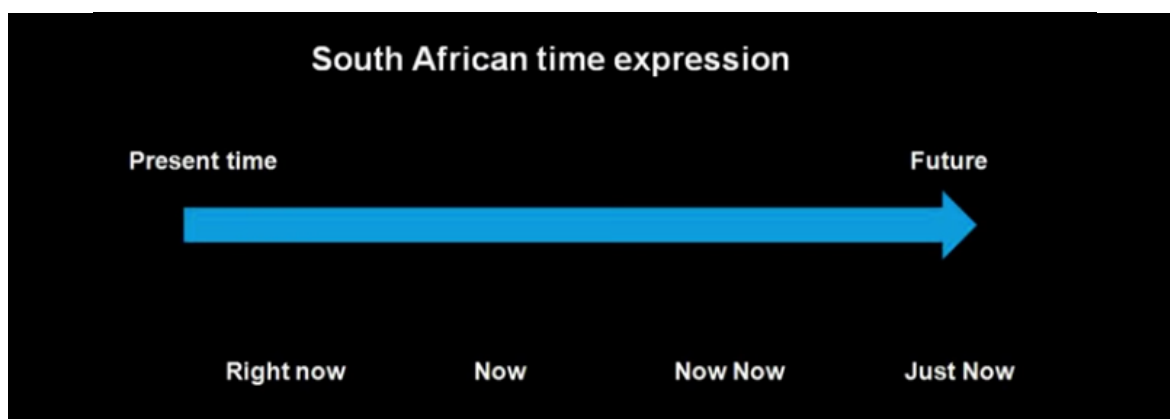
"Just now" for Fernandez's coworker might have meant any time or day in the future (maybe that day, maybe the next?) — and definitely not just "now" as most of us would understand. If this person were to give a demo to a client, and if he used the same convention, you can imagine how an innocent communication gap could've cost the company a contract.

To tackle the affinity virtual distance, educate your team on how to succeed in a multicultural environment. Make them "aware" that what they're saying might not be instantly clear to the people they're talking to. Encourage them to ask questions if something isn't clear. For Fernandez, the easy solution was to share a book called _The Culture Map_.

Physical virtual distance, as the name suggests, is the distance between the physical locations of remote employees and their time zones. These don't necessarily represent a challenge, thanks to some great tools that enable both real-time and async team communication across different locations and time zones.

To mitigate this issue, get everybody onboard with your communication policy and request team members to share their availability with each other. This will help bridge the physical virtual distance and set right expectations around communication.

Operational virtual distance concerns the logistics of remote work such as the number of team members, the degree of collaboration needed on projects, the different competencies/skills of team members and more. Again, thanks to project management tools like Jira and Trello, remote team managers can minimize operational distance. Features like resource allocation, timelines, deadlines, goals and accountability setting and reporting can help ease operational virtual distance.

Find and invest in the best communication and collaboration tools and train your employees to use them. This can be very helpful in handling both physical and operational distances.

Create a comprehensive remote work policy

You've decided that remote work is an option for your business, and identified where you will begin implementing it. You've started hiring remote workers (contractors, employees or both) and you know what to do to engage your remote team. Now, let's delve into creating the policies that will govern your remote work model.

We're still in the early days of remote work as a business phenomenon. Thanks to its inherent flexibility and cost benefits, more and more companies are incorporating remote work at least as a part of their broad operating strategy.

Most businesses make it a point to have a work policy in place within their traditional office settings. Naturally, if you are contemplating the shift to a remote work model, you will need a comprehensive remote work policy. This is especially true for larger remote teams or those that are spread across the world in different time zones. You need to have some well-established ground rules to keep things running smoothly.

A comprehensive remote work policy is all about handling expectations: of both the employer and the employee. Here's a look at the different factors you have to specify when crafting a work policy for your remote/ hybrid teams.

Specify Working Hours & Look For Time Zone Overlaps

There are two dynamics at play here: quantity and specificity. How many hours do you expect your remote employee to put in on any given day? More importantly, what time do you expect them to be available for contact?

Depending on the project and your requirements, you have the option to set a strict schedule or let the employees decide on their own… but the second aspect of availability requires careful consideration.

Availability at specific hours can be a challenge, which will be especially felt in teams that are spread out across the globe. Real-time collaboration can become quite challenging indeed. This will become even more acute if your teams are separated by a 12+ hour time difference. Take New York and Shanghai-based teams as an example: when the one in EST is going to bed, the Chinese counterpart would be just about to start their work day!

Leslie Crews, Senior Content Strategist and President of the Blurban Planner Co., a content solutions development firm based on the east coast of the United States, has a creative workaround for this issue that works for her team.

> *"Our company conducts a lot of business with clients in the Philippines. There is a twelve hour difference between us, but we don't let it slow our business or stop progress, and here's how: I created a tradition around waking up very early to meet with our clients in Manila and Davao.*
>
> *I wake up every Monday morning at 3am (EST, so our local time), get dressed as well as I would for any in-person professional business meeting, prepare my coffee and breakfast and sit down for "Not-So-Vanilla Manila Mondays". I log into Zoom and meet with each client in back-to-back conference calls; first Client A, then Client B, then Client C and so on. Two hours later, not only have I already had a productive day before everyone else has gotten out of bed, but I'm now pumped and motivated to get my morning started.*
>
> *Now other members of my crew have gotten in on Not-So-Vanilla Manila Mondays. We call it 'Not So Vanilla' because the cultural exchange between us and our clients has taught us a lot. One client even let her goat join in on the call, as she walked outside of her farmhouse and gave us a beautiful tour of her tropical home!"*
>
> **— Leslie Crews of Blurban Planner Co.**

From his experience at AY Technologies, Amin Yazdani considers these questions as central to the issue of Time Zone: "when should I be available? Is it my own timezone, or is it a central time zone for the company or a mix of those?"

Alex Turnbull at Groove has a simple solution to these questions, along with a lot of valuable insights. In his opinion, you need to find at least one specific time each day when all the members can come together and collaborate in real time.

Your remote work policy can be a great venue to describe what hours employees are supposed to work. Different teams have their own cadences, but when you plan your meeting time, make sure that everyone is online simultaneously and decide how there can be a smooth hand-off between time zones. Having your policy clearly explain these expectations is vital.

PRO TIP #12

Find a fun, creative workaround to mitigating time zone differences. Make an event or an occasion that staff on both sides of the time zone divide enjoy. When you're able to make it interesting and enjoyable, staff will learn to love- not loathe- having to accommodate this constraint.

Enable asynchronous collaboration

This is probably the Achilles heel of remote work when compared to a traditional office. If you have teams working in different time zones, constant real-time collaboration is virtually impossible.

The workaround is to focus on asynchronous collaboration. This depends on two things: planning and communication. You will need a project management tool that is accessible to the entire team, like Trello.

Your remote work policy needs to stay relevant and current with both the opportunities as well as the threats to this model of work. While it can be frustrating to have to wait longer for deliverables due to time zone differences, the expectation should be one of delivering in a set period of time without follow-ups.

The policy will, therefore, have to set basic ground rules about availability and non-availability, and both need to be respected in a healthy workplace.

Once your team knows exactly what they need to accomplish, it is important to facilitate constant communication between the members to keep the work flowing.

Jordan Wan, Founder & CEO of CloserIQ, stresses the importance of a dedicated chat platform: "It is one of the most effective tools for remote work. Tools like this make teamwork possible even when certain members are on the other side of the globe."

At firms like Trello and AY Technologies, video conferencing plays a big part in remote teams, especially for one-on-one communication between team members. Amin cites the relative lack of face-to-face interactions as a reason why video calls are more preferable to chat or email in these situations.

According to Forbes, they are a potent tool for making your remote employees feel more included and in the loop. Not all calls work well with video though. It works best if one or a handful of members have to join remotely. If a large number of individuals are connecting from different parts of the world, chat might be a better alternative.

You also need to specify the tools and platforms employees are required to use to facilitate communications. The rules of engagement (ROE) part is also challenging, especially when dealing with different cultures. "Be mindful of regional/ national holidays," and "make sure you are clear and respectful," says Amin.

PRO TIP #13

When using project management programs like Trello, maintain multiple boards dedicated to specific teams and projects with all the relevant information clearly spelled out. For example, keeping an updated list of "To Do" cards will keep your team fully in sync.

Keep your communications and data secure

Network and data security is a significant concern in regular office settings already. These concerns are heightened when you have team members working remotely, using internet connections from both public and private networks.

Also, you have no control over where your remote employee is sitting while opening a confidential brief with client information, or which device and connection they are using. Put simply, remote working arrangements provide hackers and other cyber criminals with more opportunities for attacks. The solution is to create and implement strong IT security policies/ best practices within your remote team.

Companies have different approaches to managing computing infrastructure for remote employees. Firms like GitHub have a BYOD (bring your own device) policy but insist on specific security and safeguards. These safeguards typically include stuff like secure passwords, keeping firewalls on at times, and using corporate email IDs. On the other hand, firms like LiquidSpace and SitePen insist on providing secured devices to all team members. No matter which path you choose, detailing them in your remote work policy will make things easier.

Phishing, social engineering, and malware are just a few common threats faced by individuals and businesses online today. If security/ confidentiality is a prime concern, you will need to take extra measures when dealing with remote employees.

Be clear about compensation, benefits, and liabilities

According to major employers with remote teams such as PwC, USDA, Xerox, and Sodexo, there should be no major difference in pay or benefits between regular office work and remote work.

However, you do have some flexibility in deciding how much your remote employees are paid. For instance, you can make an allowance for the location of your remote worker. Cost of living is obviously higher in big metros like New York or LA compared to, say, Richmond (Indiana) or Harlingen (Texas).

Here are a few factors to consider:

- Compensation for core working hours

- Overtime policy

- Employee benefits

- Company liabilities

- Any extra expenses covered (Think internet bills, supplies, workspace, travel)

Providing benefits beyond salary and overtime pay will help you retain skilled workers for the long term. Remote.co has some interesting suggestions on benefits that your employees might like, including paid vacations and company retreats.

Work-related injury liabilities can still apply in the case of remote workers who get injured at their home office. In Pennsylvania for example, courts have upheld a remote employee's right to compensation for injuries sustained while working from home. Consult your legal department to know the full extent of your liability when hiring remote workers.

Set an (in)formal Code of Conduct

Workplaces might be getting more informal nowadays, but etiquette can still play a crucial role in getting a diverse team to work together in harmony. Remote work depends almost entirely on internal communication channels like chat and video/audio calls. Due to the relative lack of direct personal communication, there is an increased risk of conflicts and misunderstandings. The absence of clear guidelines can compound this issue, especially in larger teams.

In small teams, common sense is often more than adequate to handle this aspect. But in larger groups with different cultural sensibilities, politeness, respect, and sensitivity are all extremely important, says Amin Yazdani. Having a clearly defined code of conduct for internal and external communications can pre-empt any damaging faux pas that may arise.

For an example of a detailed, in-depth Code of Conduct document, check out this effort from Infosys. It covers everything, including workplace behavior and relations, equal opportunity, gifts, conflicts of interest, and external communications. If you want a simpler template, Workable.com has one that might be perfect for you.

Compliance & Other Regulatory Requirements

These days, virtually all aspects of a business are covered by laws and regulations. This includes remote work, which may not be explicitly covered by local employment laws. Depending on the location of your office, you will have to include relevant information pertaining to compliance regulations.

Then there is the issue of evolving laws related to online communications, like the European Union GDPR. Since telecommuting is at the core of remote work, provisions from these laws may be applicable to your business and your employees.

Your Remote Work Policy is the ideal venue to clarify to your employees' rights and obligations, especially because distributed teams often have different jurisdictions governing them. Work with your legal team to get a document in place that lets your remote employees and job applicants know what they need to keep in mind when creating, using and sharing data with each other and outside the business.

Go the extra mile to help your remote team stay connected

Working remotely also means working (mostly) alone. This social isolation might cause some of your team members to feel lonely or demotivated. These adverse health effects aren't just unpleasant for your employees but also for your business as unhappy employees aren't very productive. Besides, you want your employees to be their healthiest and happiest.

Here are a few measures you can take to deal with the health challenges that accompany remote work.

Connect with no agenda

Arranging informal chats between your team members is another great way to beat this remote work "loneliness." Companies like Zapier and Buffer routinely arrange 10-15 minute buddy calls that give their remote employees some invaluable face-time with each other and help them feel more connected.

Offer a co-working allowance

One easy way to tackle the loneliness part of remote working is to encourage your employees to work from co-working spaces. These spaces can give your remote employees a sense of community and belonging that they might miss when working remotely. In fact, employees that visit co-working spaces report a much higher 'thriving' score at an average of 6 on a 7-point scale.

Co-working suites offer these services for businesses and entrepreneurs with nuanced needs that don't necessarily require a full office setup. Many offer desks, conference room rentals, mailbox services, and even teleconferencing equipment for a nominal monthly fee or on a subscription basis. Small business incubators also provide support in the form of seminars, training sessions, classes and networking events for entrepreneurs and their companies.

Minimize distractions

About three out of four people admit to feeling distracted while at work. While distractions in a traditional office setup (chatty coworkers or the general office noise) might be different from the distractions remote workers face (think: kids, cats, and everything in between!) — the result is the same: low productivity.

The distraction problem can actually be much worse in a remote team as on top of everything else, it comes with a barrage of work updates happening on all the different tools — incoming emails, chat notifications, workflow app alerts, calendar invites and whatnot. Then, of course, there's Netflix, too. Distractions are, in fact, one of the top three struggles of remote workers.

While you can't eliminate distractions for your remote employees, you can certainly help minimize them. Here are three ways to get started:

1. Encourage daily work routines

When Ctrip, China's largest travel agency, conducted a 9-month long experiment to test a work from home policy, they found that productivity increased by 13%. The most interesting part of this experiment? Employees working from home followed the same general routine that they were used to in the office. A routine helps protect your time from everything you shouldn't be using it for and it is a great defense against distractions. So encourage your remote employees to create and follow a routine.

2. Offer training to improve focus

About 70-75% employees feel that training can help them develop better focus and block out distractions. Invest in training to make your employees aware of their distractions and give them the tools they need to overcome them.

### 3. Offer a generous home office setup allowance

Encouraging your remote employees to create a home office is another great way to minimize distractions. With your support, they will be able to find the most "distraction-free' zone of their homes and work from there. Many remote-first companies like Buffer offer a home setup allowance.

> ### Technology:
> Get a laptop to do your best work +$500 to set up your home office!

Talk about mental wellness

Acknowledging and opening up about the psychological impact of remote working is the first step toward overcoming this challenge. Encourage your employees to talk about it. The remote team at Doist doesn't just talk about it openly but also encourages its employees to take sick days if they aren't feeling well (mentally).
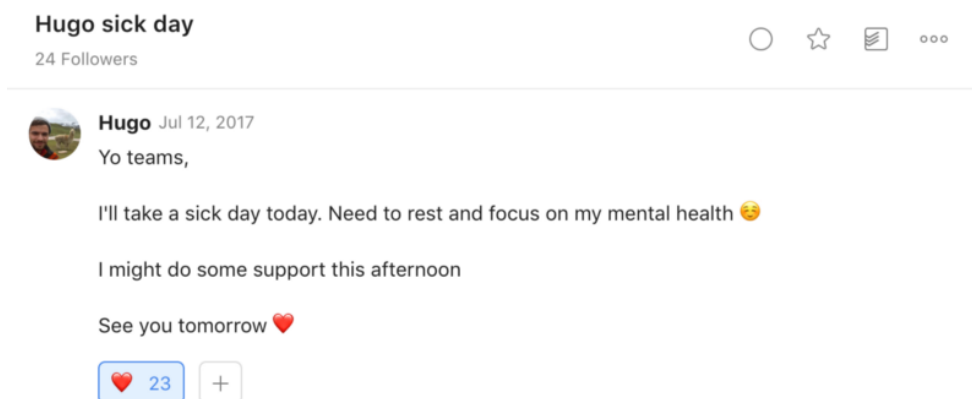
Send them on paid vacations

Vacations are great at reducing stress, improving focus, and achieving a great work-life balance. In short, you NEED your remote employees to take time off. Remote companies that understand the role vacations play in improving the mental health of their employees go as far as incentivizing them. Others give lots of paid leaves. Basecamp, for instance, offers a one-month sabbatical every three years along with a bunch of other paid days off.

These solutions can be used to get ahead of potential unhealthy feelings and habits of your remote employees; being intuitive about potential issues in advance will make your employees appreciate you and feel truly valuable to your company.

flock

Thank you!

Remote work is not a universally applicable practice for businesses, so you will need to tailor it to suit your firm's unique requirements.

This e-book aims to get you started on the path to building a great remote team, but it is up to you to decide how comprehensively you need to address each aspect of finding, hiring, and managing remote team members for your business.

Subscribe to the Flock blog for more actionable insights into building and managing successful teams — remote and not.

Interested in how Flock can help your team work better, together? **Schedule a personalized demo today** and we'll get in touch. ☺