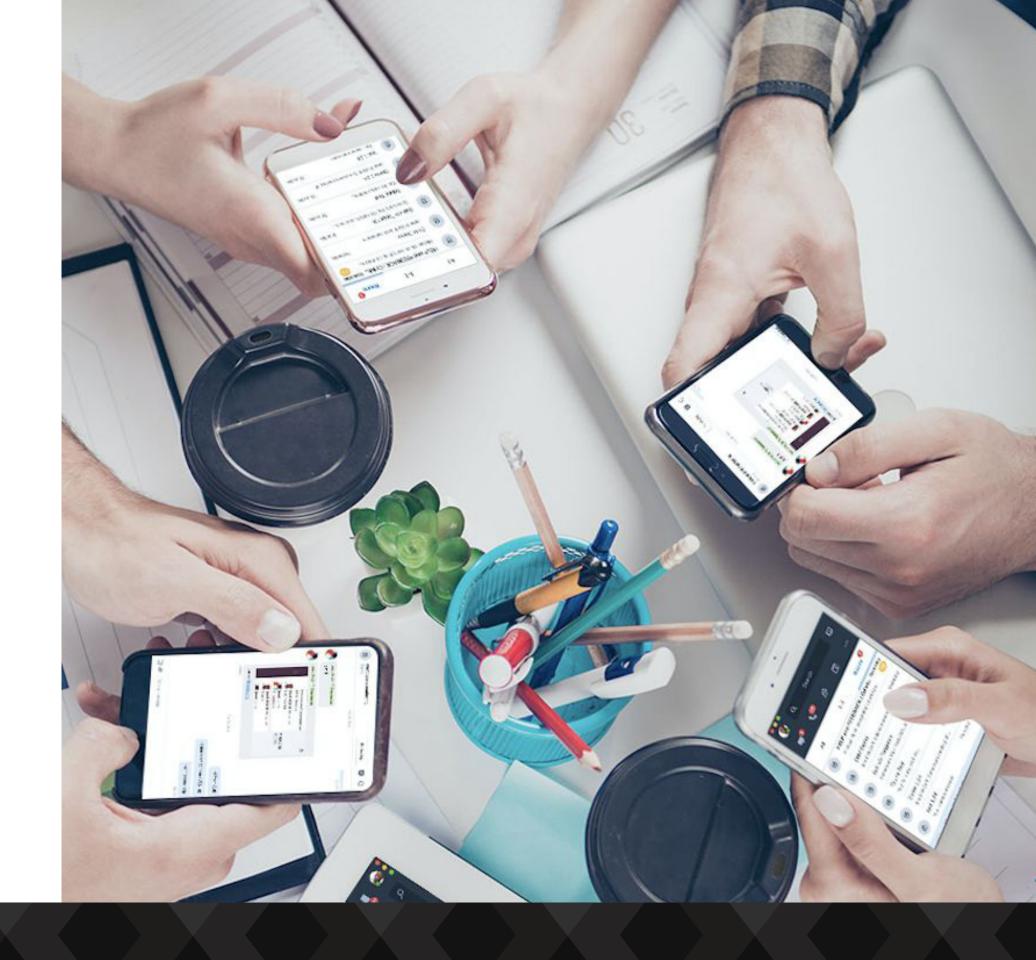# Best Practices for Connecting a Remote Workforce

Introduction

According to Global Workplace Analytics, the number of remote employees in the U.S. has risen by 159% since 2015. It's no mystery why more employees seek this flexibility, and why more companies are willing to offer it. Cost savings, a broader talent pool and higher employee retention rates just a few of the perks. But despite the growing popularity of remote positions, managers still struggle to connect their remote teams.

In this eBook, we'll address that challenge head-on. Keep reading for tips you can use to foster a more connected, collaborative culture. We'll share insight on goal-setting, communication and meeting guidelines, boosting morale and more.

Ready to begin? Let's start with an ever-important topic: setting expectations.

Tip #1: Establish Common Goals, Policies, and Expectations

It's crucial to ensure employees are working towards the same goals and apprised of your company's core values. It's even more critical when you're leading a distributed team. Training expert and speaker Jeff Toister acknowledged this in a [blog post he wrote about managing a virtual team](#). In his words, an engaged employee "**understands what makes the business or team successful, and is committed to helping achieve it.**" Do your remote employees understand what it takes to help the business succeed? Stop what you're doing and ask your team members that question. (Seriously. Ask them.) Establishing and sharing common goals is the first step to genuinely connecting your virtual team. Once you've nailed that down, it's time to communicate guidelines that reflect and support your core mission. One piece of that puzzle? Policies on work styles.

Communicate your remote work policies & expectations

Where does most workplace conflict originate? From poor communication or a lack of clear expectations. Never assume your employees know what you expect. Remote work means different things to different people. It's important to create guidelines around working hours, communication expectations and more. Here are a few things to consider as you develop policies for your virtual team.

Essential policies to establish for remote workers

- **Working hours**—When do you expect employees to log on and begin their day? Do you want them to design their schedules to fit a traditional consecutive 8-hour day? Do they need to be available for early morning or late evening phone calls to accommodate time zones? When should they take a break for lunch? Are you less concerned about the hours worked and more concerned about results? Decide what works best for your business, customers, and teams, and let everyone know!

- **Communication response times**—How quickly would you like employees to respond to customer emails? Colleagues? What about IMs? Text messages? For reference, a [Google Consumer Study revealed](#) more than 80% of customers expect a reply to email within 24 hours. 37% expect a response within an hour. And according to [FastCompany](#), more than 70% of people expect a response from coworkers within four hours.

- **Time-off requests**—One of the hottest topics at water coolers around the globe, besides the season finale of The Handmaids Tale, of course, is vacation plans. Most employees in an office are aware of their teammates' holiday plans. Those sorts of conversations don't always happen between remote employees and their peers, so it's important to establish a process for documenting time-off. It's also helpful to have a shared team vacation calendar, so everyone is in the loop. Make sure your remote workers understand your time-off policies and how to log their days off.

- **Meetings**—Managers need to establish a regular meeting cadence with remote employees. When building remote employee engagement, the adage "out of sight, out of mind" won't work. Set up a time to meet one-on-one and stick to it. It's tempting to cancel one-on-one meetings when workloads pile up. Don't. Those opportunities to connect are essential! They allow you to build trust and establish a relationship with team members you don't see face to face every day. Relationships are a vital ingredient to team success. Use the time together to check in on progress and offer performance feedback.

Keep in mind that a regular meeting cadence for managers and their employees isn't the only key to improving communication on a virtual team. Establishing clear lines of communication amongst peers is another critical part of the equation, which brings us to the second tip.

Tip #2: Communicate Regularly, Clearly, and Effectively

According to research from [Software Advice](#), thirty-eight percent of employees said communication was more difficult on virtual projects. The same study cited communication as the single greatest threat to successful and productive virtual teams. Modern technology can help solve these problems. But like in any setting, the communication still must be clear, compelling, and take place regularly. Here are a few quick tips to consider in your quest to improve communication with your virtual teams.

Video is your friend

It's hard to beat face-to-face interactions, but video can go a long way in helping your team bridge that gap. Think about all the social cues that get missed during phone conversations or emails. Connecting with colleagues via video allows you to see facial expressions, hand movements, and even get a feel for what life is like in your teammates' home offices. Video interactions also help create an emotional connection with dispersed members that leads to higher engagement and accountability. The end result? More cohesive teams and higher productivity.

Use collaborative chat channels

When you're working in cubicles, it's quick and easy to walk over to a coworker's desk and ask a question about a project. Even faster and easier—and also inclusive of remote colleagues? Chat and instant messaging tools! Using a unified communications tool that enables group chat and IM gives you the flexibility to set up topic-based channels for chatter. You can establish a channel for group projects and use it as a place for quick brainstorming sessions, status updates, and even a bit of friendly banter. Bonus: those conversations are searchable and saveable, so you won't sit down at your desk and forget what your coworker just said about that deadline.

Make time for water cooler talk during team meetings

It's impossible to replicate the live chatter that takes place in the office break room, watercooler or cafeteria. That doesn't mean managers shouldn't encourage those casual conversations to happen for remote employees, too. Here's one easy way to support those interactions. Start every meeting with a simple icebreaker. No, not those cringeworthy trust fall activities. Just a genuine question. For example, "before we dive into the agenda for today's call, I'd love to hear about one fun thing you did this weekend!" Another idea, "what's the last show you binge-watched?" These sorts of questions don't take up much time, but they help employees find common ground and build a sense of camaraderie.

Now that we've covered how to communicate more effectively, let's consider some of the common workplace communication faux pas that can harm morale and productivity. You know what they say about too much of a good thing? That rule applies to tip number three.

The team communication must be clear, compelling, and take place regularly.

Tip #3: On the Flip-Side: Resist the Urge to Overcommunicate

Trying to keep remote team members in the loop, some well-meaning managers go overboard with the emails, IMs, and conference calls. The result? Employees feel micromanaged, sense a lack of trust, or struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This spells trouble, in the form of lower morale and higher attrition. Even more alarming, it can also mean lower productivity and lost revenue. According to Business Insider, 11 million meetings happen in the U.S. every day. Even more alarming? One-third of those meetings are not productive. The cost to business? More than $37 billion each year. So the next time you decide to put a meeting on the calendar, pause, take a deep breath and consider if it's necessary.

Excessive meetings aren't the only potential pitfall. Stop and think about the other ways you communicate with remote employees, too. Yes, it's critical to keep in touch. No, that doesn't mean you need to stay in touch at all times. At its' best,

working from home can mean more productive time and fewer distractions. The constant pings of IM and text can cancel out those benefits, though. And requiring employees to switch between multiple communication platforms, with multiple passwords quickly becomes a nightmare. Add in a manager who emails, calls or texts employees at all hours of the day or on the weekends and it can quickly crush morale and stilt team productivity. It's important to remember that just because remote employees can technically be available at all hours, doesn't mean they should be. Studies show that overworked employees are less productive and generate less revenue for the business. So, resist the urge to send that 9:30 pm email or that text message on Saturday asking for a status update on a project. Respect your employees' personal lives and encourage them to engage in hobbies outside of work. It will make them more well-rounded, productive, and creative.

Quick tips for leading more productive and effective meetings:

- Set an agenda and limit it to 2-3 items. Share the agenda at least 24 hours in advance so attendees can come prepared.

- Limit the invitees. Consider the agenda. Who are the decision-makers that will be essential to include?

- Start on time and end on time.

- When hosting virtual meetings, use video and screen share when possible. These features help foster interaction and keep attendees focused.

- Institute a no cell phone rule.

- If possible, reduce one-hour meetings to 45-minutes. This gives attendees time to debrief, organize their notes, and make it to the next meeting on time.

- Consider whether you really need to hold a meeting at all. Status updates, for example, are often better suited for email or collaboration tools. Save meetings for conversations that can't take place productively via other channels. Ex: brainstorming, decision making.

- Be sure to take good notes! As the meeting organizer, you should always send out a summary/recap. Be sure to include action items, next steps, and deadlines.

Tip #4: Share in the Fun

As companies compete for top talent, the list of standard office perks grows longer. It's not uncommon for companies to offer luxury coffee bars, catered lunches or beer Fridays. But what about for the folks working from home? It's possible to let them in on the fun, too. It's not only possible, but it's also critical. If you're trying to build and foster a collaborative culture, you must make sure every employee feels included—regardless of their location. All the little details go a long way. Here are a few practical examples of inclusive fun in action.

- Establish a company spirit week, complete with theme days, and make sure remote workers get in on the action, too. For example:

  - **Monday:** Music Monday—invite team members to create and share their favorite playlist that showcases their favorite decade of music. Have everyone vote on the best playlists and offer up prizes for the winners.

  - **Tuesday:** Transformation Tuesday- make a difference together! Plan a volunteer outing that office employees can participate in together. Offer remote team members the opportunity to travel in to take part (if reasonable) or encourage them to take some time off to give back to a local cause. Bonus points if you choose a volunteer theme that unites everyone or aligns with your company mission. Ex: fighting hunger, literacy, etc.

  - **Wednesday:** Wacky Tacky Wednesday— encourage everyone to adorn their corporate swag. Ask remote workers to share pics of their attire, and crown winners for the most creative outfits.

  - **Thursday:** Throwback Thursday—invite team members to dress in fashion from their favorite decade. Again, ask remote workers to share pics, too. Take a vote and crown winners for a few decades.

  - **Friday:** Food Truck Friday—to get remote team members in on the action, offer them a gift card to a restaurant that serves a similar cuisine.

- Have a coffee bar set up in the office? Surprise remote workers with a gift card to pick up a treat from their local coffee shop. Or take it a step further and have it delivered.

- Are you offering a catered lunch in the office? Treat your virtual employees to lunch that day, too. Send a gift card to a food delivery service available in their area.

- Make lunch and learn sessions available via video conference so that remote workers can participate, too.

- Are you having an office holiday party? Make every effort to invite and provide arrangements for remote team members to attend, too.

- Are you closing early for the summer picnic? Encourage remote workers to log off early and enjoy some outside time.

The bottom line? Don't save all the fun activities for your brick and mortar locations. There are tons of creative ways to engage all your team members, regardless of where they work.

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Bringing it all together

Imagine leading a more productive, efficient, organized and happier team. How might your customers benefit from higher employee engagement and better internal communication? How might your business benefit from smarter communication, higher employee morale, and longer employee tenure? The impact could be tremendous, and with a clear strategy and strong tactics in place to bring your virtual team together, it's all possible.

Now imagine having all the tools and technology you needed to make it all just a little bit easier. How much time could you save? How many employee pain points could you solve? What if you could save money by bringing all your tools together under one license? 8x8 can help you do all three.

To learn more about how 8x8's all-in-one communications platform can empower you to connect your remote workforce, visit 8x8.com.

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