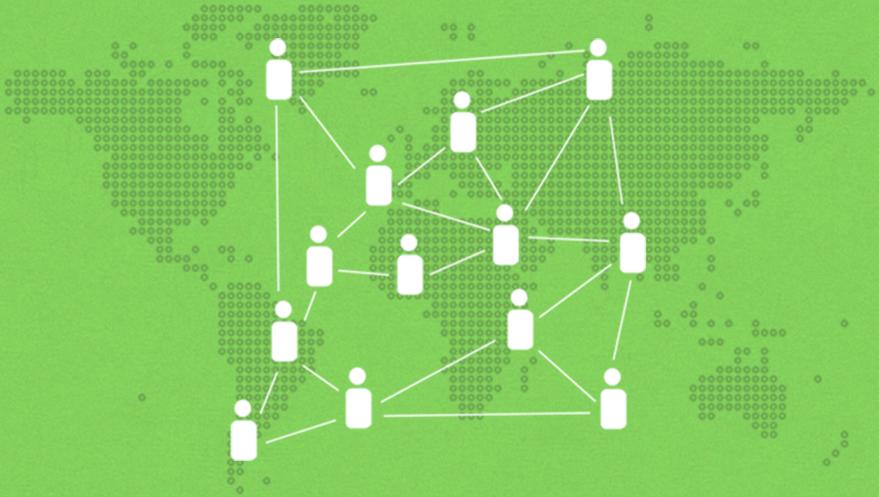


# The Ultimate Guide To



---

# Remote Work

---

# **The Ultimate Guide to Remote Work**

How to Grow, Manage and Work with Remote Teams

Zapier

©2015 Zapier Inc.

*Working remotely and running a remote team seem like black magic to many. Yet at Zapier, we've been working remotely since our founding in October of 2011. This book shares everything we've learned about running a remote team—our successes and our failures.*

*Beginning as a series of posts on the Zapier blog, this book is an ongoing work about our experiences as a remote team, with much of the book written by Zapier CEO Wade Foster along with chapters from our team members and other remote employees. We'll update it periodically so you can learn how our thinking and processes change as we've grown from three to 20+ people and beyond, and we'll keep the older versions of each chapter archived so you can learn with us over time.*

### **Who Is This Guide For?**

*Whether you currently work in or run a remote team, or you hope to work in or run a remote team in the future, this book will have nuggets of wisdom that you can apply to your current situation.*

---

*Written by Wade Foster, with content from Danny Schreiber, Alison Groves, Matthew Guay, Jeremy DuVall, and Belle Cooper. Edited by Danny Schreiber and Matthew Guay.*

# Contents

<b>Building a Remote Team</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: How to Run a Remote Team</b> . . . . .	<b>2</b>
Our Journey . . . . .	2
3 Ingredients of a Successful Remote Working Setup . . . . .	4
Learn From Others . . . . .	14
<b>Chapter 2: How to Build Culture in a Remote Team</b> . . . . .	<b>16</b>
1. Culture is About More Than Ping-Pong Tables . . . . .	17
2. Culture is About How You Work . . . . .	17
3. Tools Allow for Collaboration and Fun . . . . .	18
4. In Person Meetups are Important . . . . .	22
5. Local Community Sponsorship Shows Presence . . . . .	23
6. Trust is the Foundation . . . . .	24
7. Getting Things Done . . . . .	24
<b>Chapter 3: How to Hire a Remote Team</b> . . . . .	<b>26</b>
Defining Characteristics of a Top-Notch Remote Worker . . . . .	27
Writing an Attractive Remote Job Post . . . . .	29
Finding Remote Candidates . . . . .	32
Hiring a Remote Employee . . . . .	35
More Remote Hiring Resources . . . . .	40
<b>Chapter 4: How Successful Remote Teams Evaluate Em-</b> <b>ployees</b> . . . . .	<b>42</b>
Make New Teammates Feel Welcome from the Start . . . . .	43

## CONTENTS

Measure Output, Not Input . . . . .	44
Look to the Team for Feedback . . . . .	45
Ask for Self-Evaluations . . . . .	46
Provide Feedback Often . . . . .	47
Trust . . . . .	48
<b>Communicating in a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter 5: How to End Internal Emails and Communicate Effectively in a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>50</b>
GitHub Built “Team” to Learn What Everyone is Working On . . . . .	51
Treehouse Constructed a Reddit Clone to Bubble Up Important Items . . . . .	54
Automatic Created P2, a Microblog on its Own Platform	56
Zapier Utilizes a Customized Version of P2 . . . . .	58
Improve Your Internal Communication . . . . .	59
<b>Chapter 6: How to Build Strong Relationships in a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>61</b>
Building Rapport Remotely . . . . .	62
Relying on Text the Right Way . . . . .	64
Asserting Yourself When Needed . . . . .	68
<b>Chapter 7: How to Run a Remote Team Meeting . . . . .</b>	<b>72</b>
Time and Meeting Frequency . . . . .	73
Meeting Structure . . . . .	73
Why Does This Work? . . . . .	76
How Will This Scale? . . . . .	77
<b>Chapter 8: How to Run a Company Retreat for a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>78</b>
1. Why should you do it? . . . . .	79
2. Where should you do it? . . . . .	80
3. How long you should do it? . . . . .	81
4. What should you do? . . . . .	82

## CONTENTS

5. What about the cost? . . . . .	84
Getting Feedback on the Trip . . . . .	85
Conclusion . . . . .	86
<b>Working in a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Chapter 9: This is What a Remote Office Looks Like . . . . .</b>	<b>88</b>
Alison Groves, Customer Champion - Nashville, Tenn. . . . .	89
Brian Cooksey, Platform Engineer - Columbia, Mo. . . . .	90
Bryan Helmig, Backend Engineer - Sunnyvale, Calif. . . . .	91
Christopher Peters, Data Scientist - Miami, Florida . . . . .	92
Craig Labenz, Full Stack Engineer - Nomad. . . . .	93
Danny Schreiber, Marketing Lead - Omaha, Neb. . . . .	94
James Carr, Systems Engineer - Columbia, Mo. . . . .	95
Jess Byrne, Customer Champion - Kunkletown, Penn. . . . .	96
Joe Stych, Content Marketer - Portland, Me. . . . .	97
Justin Deal, Full Stack Engineer - Manchester, Mo. . . . .	98
Lindsay Brand, Customer Champion - Barcelona, Spain. . . . .	99
Matthew Guay, Marketing - Bangkok, Thailand . . . . .	100
Micah Bennett, Customer Champion - Palatine, Ill. . . . .	101
Mike Knoop, Product and Partner Lead - Sunnyvale, Calif. . . . .	102
Rob Golding, Full Stack Engineer - Nottingham, UK. . . . .	103
Wade Foster, CEO - Sunnyvale, Calif. . . . .	104
Additional Thoughts . . . . .	105
<b>Chapter 10: How to Work Faster in a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>106</b>
Are You More Productive? . . . . .	107
How to Work Faster Like a Remote Team . . . . .	109
1. Pull Internal Communication Out of Your Inbox . . . . .	110
2. Rely on the Right Tools . . . . .	112
3. Use Differing Schedules to Your Advantage . . . . .	114
4. Skip the Commute . . . . .	115
5. Cancel Meetings . . . . .	117
6. Think Before You Send . . . . .	118
7. Set Up Your Best Environment . . . . .	120

## CONTENTS

8. Own Up to Your Productivity . . . . .	122
Not So Fast... What Doesn't Work About Remote Work . . . . .	124
The Right Reason to Go Remote? . . . . .	124
Unplug . . . . .	125
<b>Chapter 11: How to Find Your Optimal Work Environment and Boost Productivity . . . . .</b>	<b>126</b>
Time of Day . . . . .	127
Surroundings . . . . .	129
Managing Your Workload . . . . .	131
<b>Chapter 12: How to Work in Different Timezones . . . . .</b>	<b>134</b>
5 Pros of Remote Work, and How to Take Advantage . . . . .	135
6 Cons of Remote Work, and How to Overcome . . . . .	135
5 Pros of Remote Work, and How to Take Advantage . . . . .	136
6 Cons of Remote Work, and How to Overcome Them . . . . .	142
Build Your Own Small World . . . . .	158
<b>Chapter 13: How to Avoid Burnout in a Remote Team . . . . .</b>	<b>160</b>
1. Establish and Maintain a Routine . . . . .	161
2. Set and Stick to Priorities . . . . .	165
3. Create and Keep Boundaries . . . . .	169
4. Take Short and Long Breaks . . . . .	170
5. Make Time for Human Interaction . . . . .	172
Don't Flame Out . . . . .	174
<b>Chapter 14: A Special Thanks To Those Who Share . . . . .</b>	<b>176</b>
Automattic . . . . .	176
GitHub . . . . .	177
Basecamp (formerly 37Signals) . . . . .	177
Treehouse . . . . .	178
Buffer . . . . .	178
Help Scout . . . . .	178
Groove . . . . .	179
Fogcreek . . . . .	179
Stack Exchange . . . . .	179

## CONTENTS

Wide Teams . . . . .	180
WooThemes . . . . .	180
Popforms . . . . .	180
Scott Hanselman . . . . .	181
Steven Sinofsky . . . . .	181
StatusPages . . . . .	181
iDoneThis . . . . .	181
HubSpot . . . . .	182
Remotive.io . . . . .	182

# Building a Remote Team

*Including:*

- How to Run a Remote Team
- How to Build Culture in a Remote Team
- How to Hire a Remote Team
- How Successful Remote Teams Evaluate Employees

# Chapter 1: How to Run a Remote Team



*This chapter is based on the current Zapier team size of 20. A previous version exists that reflects the operations of Zapier at a [team size of 6](#).*

A lot of energy has been expended over the last few years debating the merits of remote work. Unfortunately, not much information is shared about how to setup remote work so that you and your team can be successful.

For over three years, Zapier has ran as a remote team. We've grown from three founders to over twenty people. We've gotten a lot of questions about how we make it work. This chapter will explain how we make it work.

Now, if you want to debate what's best remote work or co-located work—this chapter isn't for you. But, if you want some ideas on how one team has setup their team to be successful at remote work, then stick around. *This chapter is for you.*

## Our Journey

From day one, (October 2011) Zapier has always been a distributed team. Even though Bryan, Mike and I lived in the same city, we had different schedules and were bootstrapping Zapier on the side

of our day jobs and school. We worked on Zapier in every spare moment we each had, but those moments didn't magically line up at the same time where we could work in the same room, so by necessity we became a remote team.

In June of 2012, we were accepted into Y Combinator and moved into a shared apartment in Mountain View, California. The next three months were the only period in our company's history where everyone has been in the same city at the same time.

In August of 2012, Mike moved back to Missouri while his girlfriend was graduating law school, and in October of 2012 we started hiring. And since we were already a distributed team it made sense to keep moving that way since we could hire people we knew were awesome, but just didn't live in the places we lived.

- October 2012, Micah in Chicago, IL
- January 2013, James in Columbia, MO
- March 2013, Cooksey in Columbia, MO
- July 2013, Danny in Omaha, NE
- January 2014, Jess in Rural, PA
- April 2014, Chris in Miami, FL
- May 2014, Justin in St. Louis, MO
- May 2014, Alison in Nashville, TN
- July 2014, Brandon in Tampa, FL
- August 2014, Matthew in Bangkok, Thailand
- August 2014, Rob in Nottingham, UK
- November 2014, Andrew in Tampa, FL
- November 2014, Jason in Tampa, FL
- December 2014, Thomas in New Haven, CT
- December 2014, Joe in Portland, MA
- January 2015, Lindsay in Barcelona, Spain
- February 2015, Steve in St. Louis, MO
- February 2015, Craig in Detroit, MI

- March 2015, Julie in St. Louis, MO
- March 2015, Ben in Minneapolis, MN
- April 2015, Stephanie in Chicago, IL

Over the course of 41 months, we've learned a few things about building and managing a remote team. There are others with more experience at this than us. I'm not sure how large it will scale, though companies like GitHub, Automattic, Citrix and others have proven that it can be done. But if you're a small team and want to dip your toes into remote work, consider this your crash course.

## 3 Ingredients of a Successful Remote Working Setup

It's highly unlikely you could pluck any random set of people, at any random moment in history, dispersed around the globe, put them together and expect them to build something amazing.

We've found there are three important ingredients to making remote work, well, work: **Team**, **Tools**, and **Process**.

### Team

By far the most important of the ingredients is the team. Not everyone can work in a remote environment. Not everyone can manage a remote environment (though I suspect with a bit of time and learning that a lot of managers could figure out how to make it work). Therefore, it's important to assemble a team who is capable of executing in a remote environment. Here's what has made the best remote workers for us:

#### 1. Hire Doers

Doers will get stuff done even if they are in Timbuktu. You don't have to give doers tasks to know that something will get done.

You'll still have to provide direction and guidance around the most important things to be executed, but in the absence of that, a doer will make something happen.

## **2. Hire people you can trust**

Remote work stops working when you can't trust the person on the other end of the line. If you continually find yourself worrying what someone is doing, then you are spending brain cycles focusing on something other than the product. Trust is key.

## **3. Trust the people you hire**

The flip side of this is you also need to exhibit trust with the people you hire. As a manager, you need to learn to manage by expectations rather than by "butts in seat," so make sure you can show trust in those you hire.

## **4. Hire people who can write**

In a co-located office, a lot of information is shared in-person. In a remote situation, everything is shared via written communication. Communication is one of the most important parts of remote team. Therefore, good writers are valuable.

## **5. Hire people who are ok without a social workplace**

It'll be important to try to create some social aspects with a remote team. But the truth of the matter is that remote workplaces are usually less social than co-located ones. People on remote teams need to be ok with that. And the best remote workers will thrive in this type of environment.

# **Tools**

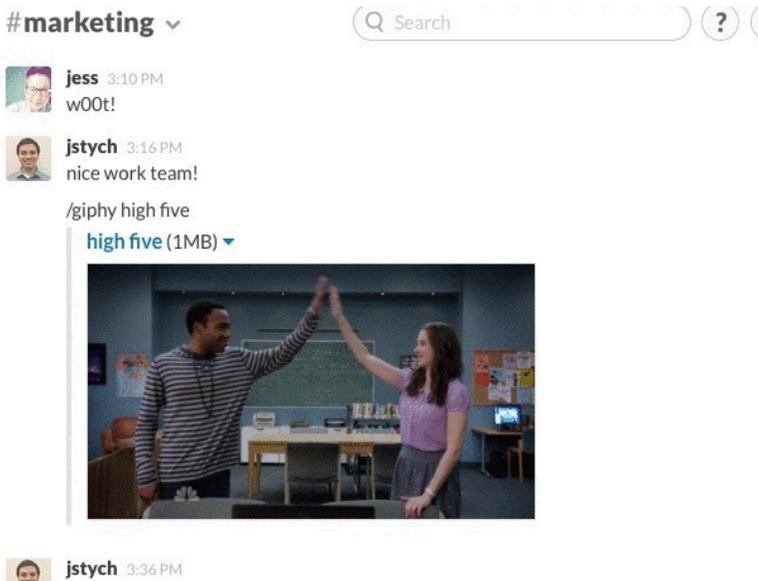
Tools are important in a remote workplace because they enable you to better organize the team and keep everyone on the same page.

In a co-located facility you can always round up the team for an all-hands meeting to steer everyone on track. In a remote team, you'll

need the right tools to make sure everyone stays on the same page and can continue to execute without a physical person standing next to them.

Here are some tools we've found handy as a team of 20. These tools have changed quite a bit over the years. Check out previous versions of this post to see what's changed.

## 1. Slack



### Chilling in Slack

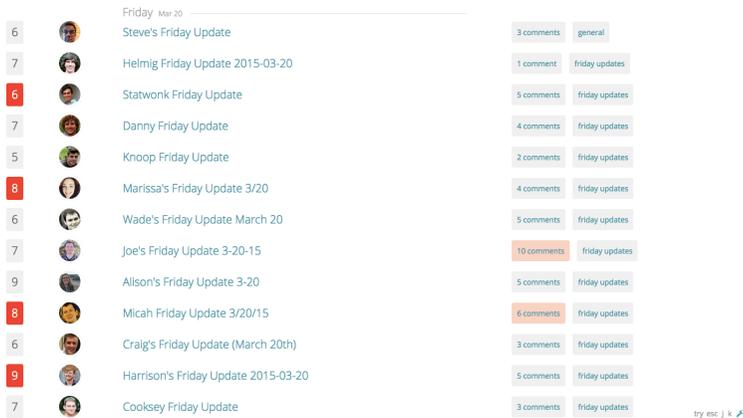
Slack is our virtual office. If you're in Slack then you're at work. A group chat room like Slack is also great at creating camaraderie.

Depending on your team size, you'll want to make use of channels in Slack as well. At a certain size it can start to get noisy, so it makes sense to section off rooms into things like "water cooler", "engineering", "marketing", etc. I would hold off on this as long as possible though.

At around 10 people we started creating multiple channels. We now

have 23 channels (some which need to be archived). Active ones include functional channels like #marketing, #support and #hacking along with project specific channels like #min and #pricing.

## 2. Async

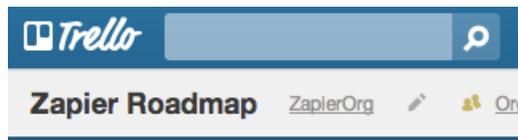


### Zapier Using Async

Async is an internal tool we built. It's sort of like a blog meets reddit. Previously we used the [P2 theme](#) from WordPress, but found ourselves wanting more.

Async is a place where we can surface important conversations that get lost in the fast paced Slack. It's replaces internal email and acts as a great archive for anyone on the team to reference old discussions.

## 3. Trello



Trello acts as our default roadmap. Anytime we have something we'd like to do, we add it to a to-do list in Trello. In most situations, you'll find yourself creating way too many cards trying to do too

many things. The trick we use to avoid getting card overload in Trello is that in order to create a card you also have to write a detailed description of what the feature is, why it's important, and what the results of a successful implementation of this feature should look like.

We also use Trello boards for keeping track of our editorial calendar, support documentation and really any project that needs to get done.

This works great for remote teams, because if anyone in the company is looking for something to do, they can just go pick a card off the Trello board and know that it's going to be a positive feature for the product/company.

We love Trello, but there's also other [great project management apps](#) that you might use too.

#### 4. [GitHub](#)

Issues and pull requests are used for specific purposes at Zapier. Much as how [GitHub uses GitHub to build GitHub](#), we use GitHub to build Zapier. GitHub houses all code related project management. Pull Requests are how new features get shipped. Issues are reserved for bugs only. Features happen in Trello and/or a planning doc.

#### 5. [LastPass Enterprise](#)

Since we have logins to hundreds of services it's helpful for anyone who walks into the company to be able to access any of them without having to fire off an instant message or wait for an email reply. With LastPass, any teammate can login to any of the services we use or integrate with without having to know the login credentials.

#### 6. [Google Docs & Hackpad](#)

For almost any other documentation Google Docs is great. We share spreadsheets for ad hoc analysis of key metrics. We share spreadsheets with team info and other vital info that might be used

later. We share documents for contracts and records. Anything that might get used multiple times should be documented and Google Docs is an easy, shared environment to make that happen.

Google Docs fails for organization and collaboration, though. We've found Hackpad to be great for internal documentation. Any documentation that needs to teach someone how to do something internal gets added to a pad and collection inside Hackpad so that others can quickly access the collective brain of Zapier.

### 7. GoToMeeting

There are tons of hip and cool video conferencing tools. GoToMeeting is not one of those. It's clunky and there are more GoToMeeting versions than *Land Before Time* movies, but GoToMeeting does audio and video quality better than any other provider we've tried. We've tried a lot too. Sometimes we'll do Google Hangouts or Skype for one off calls, but when you need to host a team chat with more than 10 people, GoToMeeting is your friend.

### 8. HelloSign

Every now and then, you and your employees might need to sign something. Spare yourself the hassle of printing out the document, signing it, scanning it back onto your machine, and sharing the document with the next person that signs and instead just use HelloSign. It'll make your head hurt a lot less.

## Processes

The third ingredient in a powerful remote team is process. I know most people don't like to think about process, and process feels boring and rigid. But if you think of process as "how we work" it starts to feel more powerful.

Good processes let you get work done in the absence of all else. It provides structure and direction for getting things done.

That doesn't mean processes should be rigid, unchanging or pointless though. Process, at a small company, is more about providing a feedback loop so that you can measure progress for both the company and the people in the company.

Here's a few of the processes we use to make Zapier run. Or is I like to call them: *How We Work*.

### **1. Everyone does support**

The customer is our lifeblood. We strive everyday to solve our customers' problems and help make their job just a little bit easier. When everyone on the team does support, everyone gets to hear the voice of the customer.

Also, the people who build the product also end up supporting the product. If a customer is angry about a bug, then the person who introduced said bug is going to hear about it and fix it right away.

*Read more about how we do support [here](#).*

### **2. A culture of shipping**

Since everyone does support, we've built the dev schedule so that each developer spends one week on support out of how many engineers are currently on the Zapier team. The other weeks engineers are 100% dedicated to features so that they don't have to worry about support. The 100% focus on certain projects when not on support gives a developer enough time to ship something sizable. This keeps a good cadence of new features coming.

### **3. Weekly Hangouts**

Every Thursday morning at 9am PDT we get together for lightning talks, demos and/or interviews. Since we're over 20 people now, it's hard to see everyone on a weekly basis. These hangouts are a chance to say "hi!" to folks you may not normally see.

These hangouts are also a good chance to learn something new. Each week someone inside the team does a lightning talk or demo

on something interesting or if someone is in the running to join the team, we have them present a lightning talk.

The meetings happen at Thursday at 9am because that's roughly the best time for a geographically dispersed team so that no ones weekend gets disturbed too much.

#### **4. Pair Buddies**

As we've grown, it can be harder to know all your teammates. One easy way to mitigate that is to have folks on the team get paired up with one other teammate at random each week for a short 10-15 minute pair call. We use this to chat about life, work or whatever random thing seems interesting. Sometimes cool new product features come out of these, other times it's just good fun. Regardless it helps everyone better know their teammates.

#### **5. Monthly One-on-Ones**

In every job I ever had (even co-located ones), there wasn't enough feedback between me and my supervisor. So at Zapier, I setup a recurring monthly event with each team member where we both jump on Skype or Google Hangout to chat about four things: what's one thing you're excited about, what's one thing you're worried about, what's one thing I can do better to help him with your job, and what's one thing you can do better to improve at your job.

These questions are consistent so it's easy to prepare and so that it's easy to measure changes over time. We specifically limit it to one item per question. One item is easily achievable for a person each month. But over time, being able to fix one issue a month adds up.

The answers to each monthly session are logged in a Google Document so that the next session we can reference the previous month's information and check on how we did.

In the past I did one-on-ones with everyone. However around 15 people this got to be too hard to keep up with everyone on a meaningful level. Now I focus on the support and marketing team

while Bryan and Mike (my co-founders) focus on the engineering and product teams respectively.

These review sessions are especially great at revealing how we are doing as a remote team, since it lets me get feedback on both small and big things we can do to make the company more enjoyable. For instance, I found out that Cooksey and James occasionally co-work downtown in Columbia and ended up paying for parking on their own dime. So as a result we setup a simple reimbursement program to make sure you can get your money back for company expenses.

## **6. A culture of accountability**

One question often presented is “how do you know if people are doing work?” Any easy way we know is with Friday updates. Each Friday, every person on the team posts an update to Async about what they shipped that week and what they are working on for the next week.

This makes it easy to keep in the loop on projects and also keeps everyone at Zapier accountable to everyone else to do their part.

## **7. Building culture in person**



**Awesome Seattle View from one of our retreat locations**

In person interaction is valuable for any team. There is definitely something unique that happens when teammates can work on something in person. As a result we strive to bring the team together two times a year somewhere cool.

We've visited Washington, Colorado, Alabama and Utah on company retreats.

In addition to the all-company get togethers, small groups of us might get together on an ad hoc basis throughout the year to coordinate the start of a major project or feature. Usually this is just one person jumping on a flight to visit another person.

If this seems expensive, that's because it is. But the great part is that you'll likely have the money to cover this plus more since you don't have to pay for a central office that everyone is working in.

## **8. Automate anything that can be automated**

The core of Zapier is automation. There are a couple reasons why we automate things. One, it allows us to keep the team size small since we don't need people on staff to perform repetitious, mundane and boring tasks. Two, it lets teammates focus on high impact work

nearly all of the time rather than figuring out less impactful things, like the proper deploy commands.

## Learn From Others

A lot of this has been knowledge built up from others. Unfortunately, not many people write about the topic of remote working and how to manage it. Most articles dive only a inch deep with light weight suggestions like “use Google Hangouts” which isn’t super helpful.

The best way to learn about remote working is to ask other people who do remote working. I’ve learned a ton from people like [Lance Walley](#) at Chargify, [Joel Gascoigne](#) at Buffer, the entire [Basecamp](#) (formerly 37Signals) team, [Zach Holman](#) at GitHub and a slew of other founders and remote workers.

If you are looking for other great resources here are some that are worth checking out:

1. [Ryan Carson on managing 40 people remotely](#)
2. [Ryan Carson Mixergy Course](#)
3. [Almost any talk by Zach Holman on how GitHub works](#)
4. [Wide Teams puts out a great weekly podcast about remote work](#)
5. [Steve Smith on Optimizing for Happiness](#)
6. [Aii Pienaar on trusting people](#)
7. [Aii Pienaar on the challenge of remote working](#)
8. [37Signals’ book Remote.](#)

Hopefully this chapter can give you some deep insights into how one team manages a remote team. Don’t take this as universal truth though. One of the beauties of a remote team is that because remote work feels more like an experiment everything else feels like it can

be more experimental too. So go ahead and experiment! The biggest wins aren't usually found in a post on the internet, but in what you discover on your own.

---

*Written by Wade Foster*

# Chapter 2: How to Build Culture in a Remote Team



One point that is frequently discussed with remote teams is culture. Common knowledge suggests that co-located teams have an easier time building culture vs. remote teams.

In fact, I've even had co-located teams tell me their culture problems were solved by simply buying a foosball table. Though I challenge the truthiness of that statement, I don't think there's a quick path to building company culture, and remote teams certainly aren't an exception.

**With co-located teams, it's easy to ignore culture building with the expectation that it will naturally happen.** In 99% of situations (made up number), this is simply not true, but by the time a co-located team realizes it, it might be too late to repair their culture.

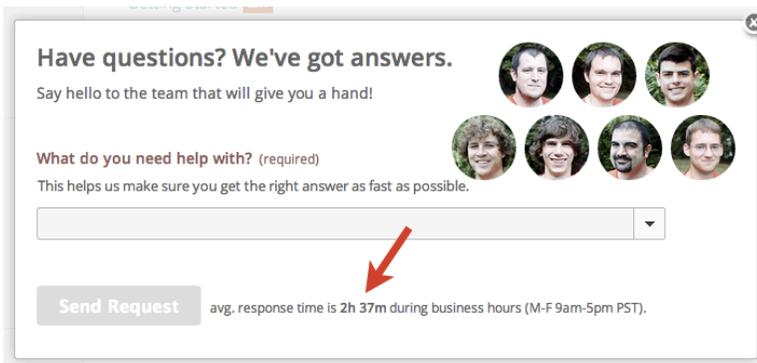
**With a distributed team you know going in that culture will be really hard to build.** As a remote team you don't delude yourself thinking that culture will magically happen. You go in eyes wide open. If a strong culture doesn't develop it's not because you didn't try, it's usually due to another reason.

With that in mind, how can you go about building culture when there are thousands of miles between teammates? Here are seven principles that work for us at Zapier.

# 1. Culture is About More Than Ping-Pong Tables

The first thing to realize is that your culture has to be built around more than ping pong tables. Games and other group activities that lend themselves to being in person are simply not a possibility on a day-to-day basis for remote teams. Therefore, your culture has to be built around something more than playing table tennis to unite the team.

## 2. Culture is About How You Work



Have questions? We've got answers.

Say hello to the team that will give you a hand!

What do you need help with? (required)

This helps us make sure you get the right answer as fast as possible.

avg. response time is 2h 37m during business hours (M-F 9am-5pm PST).

The screenshot shows a help request form with a red arrow pointing to the 'Send Request' button. The form includes a header with the text 'Have questions? We've got answers.' and 'Say hello to the team that will give you a hand!'. Below this is a section titled 'What do you need help with? (required)' with a subtext 'This helps us make sure you get the right answer as fast as possible.' and a text input field. At the bottom, there is a 'Send Request' button and a note: 'avg. response time is 2h 37m during business hours (M-F 9am-5pm PST)'. There are also several circular profile pictures of team members.

Everyone that works on Zapier has bought into the belief that you come to work for the work, not for the ping pong. Most of your time at work is going to be work, so the work has to be rewarding by itself. Here are examples:

- How we talk to customers (is speed more important than quality?)
- How we communicate with each other (is this a phone call conversation or an email conversation or a chat conversation?)

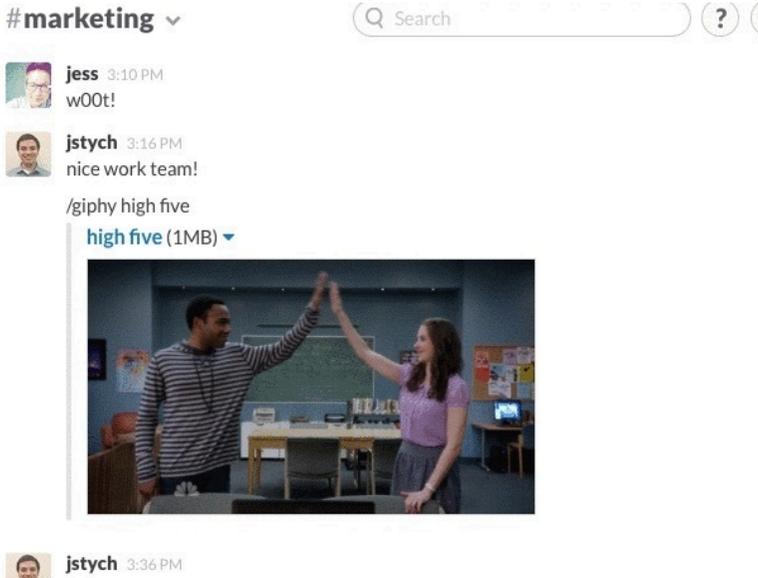
- How much work do you do (do we work 40 hours or 80 hours?)

Those decisions and values create culture in remote companies more than a ping pong table would.

### **3. Tools Allow for Collaboration and Fun**

A co-located office develops its own personality through inside jokes, shared experiences and a collaborative environment, such as a meeting room with white boards. A remote team needs to develop something similar. The easiest way to do this is with your day-to-day tool set. Here are some tools we love that have helped build our culture.

## Slack



**Slack** is our virtual office. If you're in Slack then you're at work. It's the online version of the water cooler. Where random work discussions happen, but also where news, jokes and pop culture are bantered back and forth. The best part of Slack is that our water cooler discussions are recorded. Nothing gets lost. And there's no "behind-your-back politics" that happens in many co-located offices.

## GIFs and Memes



Most online communities have a go-to set of GIFs and memes they love. Zapier is no different. Being able to drop a relevant GIF or meme seconds after a timely Slack comment is one of the more spectacularly amusing things that happens in our little digital office place. Slack in particular has a great Giphy integration where you start a message with `/giphy` followed by your search term and a relevant (or often times a not so relevant) gif is inserted.

## P2/Async

P2, or Async as well call it, is a WordPress theme that makes it really easy to post updates. We use it to replace all our team emails. The asynchronous nature of P2 and threaded comments makes it a lot easier to share things—from the [Cardinals advancing to the World Series](#) to architectural scaling issues—P2 helps keep everyone on the

same page. It's almost like our own mini version of Reddit.

If you're interested in learning more about P2 check out "How P2 Changed Automatic" (the team behind WordPress) [here](#).

## Hangouts, Pair Buddies and GoToMeeting

Chat is awesome, but being able to talk in real time and visually see someone is still pretty important for some issues. Google Hangouts for quick, ad-hoc one-on-one meetings or GoToMeeting for bigger team meetings make it easy to work in real time. During these chats, it's always fun to have a five-minute personal check up just to see what the other person/people are up to.

Pair Buddies are a weekly random pairing with someone on the team and allow you to catch up on work, life or anything else. This keeps some semblance of the office social life as part of work.

## Music Subscriptions with Uncover

One of our favorite services is [Uncover](#). Uncover makes it really easy to give perks to your employees. We've given everyone premium Spotify/Rdio accounts which is great since many remote employees love to listen to music during the day.

Having music handy makes it fun to share what everyone is listening to and hear what sort of eclectic tastes everyone has. The #music channel in Slack has favorite tunes that everyone is jamming out to.

## 4. In Person Meetups are Important



We get the whole gang together twice per year for a company retreat. During the retreat we do things that help foster our culture. Things like pairing up to cook team dinners and hiking as a group have helped us learn more about each other and our families—it's knowledge we wouldn't have gained in a normal week.

## 5. Local Community Sponsorship Shows Presence



We haven't done this a ton, but when we have it works. So far we've sponsored [dev/como](#), which [James Carr](#) runs, a handful of times and we've also made sure to [go back and sponsor Startup Weekend Columbia](#) every year. We've also donated an afternoon of our time to a non-profit during our retreats to give back.

Any time someone on the team wants to do something like this in their city, we're happy to sponsor. I imagine as the team grows we'll be fortunate to help foster many local communities around the globe.

By doing this, team members feel more like there is a local presence in their hometown.

## 6. Trust is the Foundation

Remote teams have to trust their teammates. There is simply no way around it. The beauty of trusting your teammates is that often times your teammates reward you. Most people genuinely want to do a good job. In a remote team there aren't any silly rules about having your butts in a seat during certain hours of the day. This means at the end of the week you either have something to show for your week or not. This means you trust that your teammates are getting something done. But also your teammates trust you. To earn that trust you want to make sure you have something to show for your work each week.

## 7. Getting Things Done



1:07 pm on October 18, 2013 (Friday Update)

[Permalink](#) | [Reply](#) | [Edit](#) | [Like \(0\)](#)

### Mike's Friday Update (10/18)

Here's my rundown of my week.

#### 1. Support

Support this week was kept in check, partly thanks to the last-minute efforts of [@bryan](#) yesterday. We resolved a big [Salesforce](#) timeout problem and also made a number

P2

Getting things done tends to be a by-product of trust. Because there is an implicit trust in your teammates and because there is no other way to measure results in a remote team, the team inherently evaluates each other on what was completed that week. We do this by sharing weekly updates on our internal blog (P2) every Friday—I bet you can imagine how it would feel to be the only one with nothing to show. That feeling creates a desire to finish something important each week.

As remote teams get more popular, I expect we'll hear more about the cultures in remote teams and how they develop differently from

co-located teams.

---

*Written by Wade Foster*

*Credits: Ping pong photo by [Wonderlane](#) via Flickr.*

# Chapter 3: How to Hire a Remote Team



Over the course of Zapier's 41-month existence, we've grown from three founders cramped in a small apartment to a team of 21 around the world. While we're certainly not experts at hiring, we have picked up a few tricks (and things to avoid) to make building a remote team easier.

This chapter covers:

- Defining Characteristics of a Top-Notch Remote Worker
- Writing an Attractive Remote Job Post
- Finding Remote Candidates
- Hiring a Remote Employee

*The photos in this chapter are from the Zapier Alabamda [team retreat](#), which we hold every 6 months for in-person interaction.*

## Defining Characteristics of a Top-Notch Remote Worker



Not everyone is cut out for remote work, so before you begin hiring people for a remote position you'll need to consider the skills it takes to be successful in this type of environment.

Great remote workers have a few traits that make them successful:

- **Propensity towards action:** This is the type of person that devoid of a task list given to them, they'll find something meaningful to do.
- **Able to prioritize:** Often times, important tasks can be unclear when working remotely (especially at a startup). An individual who can focus on the right tasks and know to ignore others will do well.

- **Proficient written communicator:** Most communication in a remote team happens via text—email, team chat, or one-on-one private messages. If someone struggles to write clearly and concisely, they’ll struggle in a remote team. Equally as important is being able to show tact in written communication, too. It’s all-too-easy to come off as curt via text. Liberal use of emoticons can go a long way.
- **Trustworthy:** If you can’t trust the person, then not being able to see them every day is going to cause you to lose sleep. Make sure you trust who you hire.
- **Local support system:** If the only support system someone has is their work one, then being in a remote environment will likely make them go crazy. You need people who have outside support systems so they have people they can interact with on a daily/weekly basis.

[Joel Gascoigne](#) and the team at [Buffer](#) have found that people with these traits often come from freelance, contracting or startup backgrounds. We’ve certainly found that to be true, too. Ten of our first 13 hires at Zapier have startup or freelance work in their background.

## Writing an Attractive Remote Job Post



Before you start sourcing candidates, you want to make sure to do a good job at defining the position. Often times, companies throw up a generic job opening for a marketer or developer, which doesn't really help the candidate decide if they want to work for your company or not. Since remote companies don't have a local reputation, it's up to you to sell your company just as much as the role.

When it comes to defining the position, the best way to do this is to first fill the position yourself, even if it's only for a week. The work you do will help you understand what's involved in this role at a much deeper level.

This is a trick that [Basecamp](#) (formerly 37signals) uses when hiring for a new role. [Jason Fried](#), the company's co-founder, recently [explained this practice](#) in a Reddit AMA.

When it comes to an all-new position at the company,

we like to try to do it first with the people we have so we really understand the work. If you don't understand the work, it's really hard to evaluate someone's abilities. Before we hired our first customer service person, I did just about all the customer service for two years. Before we hired an office manager, David and I mostly split the duties. That really helped us know who would be good when we started talking to people about the job.

By doing the role you are hiring for you'll also be able to write a more compelling job description and be better able to define how the role relates to the company and its success.

As a result, your job posting will be a detailed listing that explains the ins-and-outs of what you do as a company. This might turn some people away, but those people wouldn't have been a good fit anyway. Instead, you'll get applicants that are much more invested in being a part of your company.

Also, in the job posting, ask them to apply in a unique way—don't just ask for resumes. Instead, try to make the application process prove their abilities for the job.

For instance, when hiring for our business development position we had candidates [complete a series of short exercises](#) that tested the basics of the role's partner duties. And rather than asking for a cover letter upfront, we asked them to write a sample pitch email to a partner.



**Patrick McKenzie**  
@patio11



Love [@zapier](#)'s FizzBuzz-for-bizdev question [zapier.com/blog/biz-dev-s...](http://zapier.com/blog/biz-dev-s...) ("Tell us how you would get in touch with the CEO of Infusionsoft.")

6:25 AM - 27 Jun 2014



**Biz Dev and Partner Marketing at Zapier**

By **Wade Foster** @wadefoster

This position has been filled. But if you're interested in other roles please check them out. Hi there! We're looking for an individual to take charge of some of our business development and partner...

 **Zapier** @zapier

8 RETWEETS 23 FAVORITES



See the post at <http://zpr.io/R84B>

People excited about your company are willing to complete these extra tasks, often with enjoyment. Those who aren't a good fit just skip your post or forget to do it so, turning the unique application process into a filter.

## Finding Remote Candidates

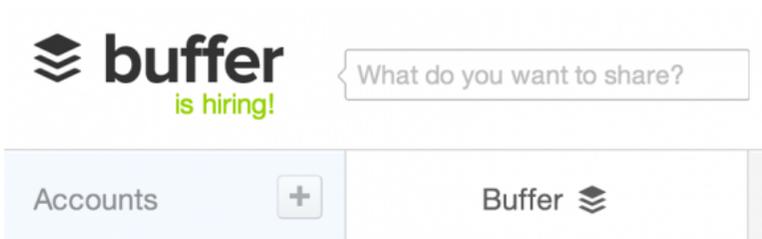


It's impossible to hire if you don't have candidates for the role, of course, so the first thing to consider is how people will find out about your open position. Here's where we've had the best luck.

- **Our Networks:** People you've worked with in the past are great candidates to join up with you. This is especially true if you enjoyed working with them and want to work with them again. Also, ask customers, partners, investors, family, friends and anyone you think might be helpful if they know of any good candidates. Often times, people aren't actively looking for jobs, but they will confide in a friend that they are unhappy in their current role.
- **Local meetup groups:** It's a bit odd to recommend local recruiting for a remote team, but this has worked out well for us. We're well connected with Missouri dev meetup groups since the founding team has strong ties to the region. Many

of the people in the area are excited about Zapier and stay in touch with what we do.

- **Your own userbase:** If you're fortunate enough to have a large userbase that matches the credentials you need, then it can be a great place to recruit from. We do this by following a trick of Buffer's and placing a subtle "is hiring!" link under our logo so it's impossible for site visitors to miss. This drives dozens of daily applications when we have open positions. Additionally, your users are likely a strong culture fit since they are already more familiar with your company and how you operate.



- **Your blog:** We don't publish positions on our blog but still see our [increased content effort](#) pay off in the hiring process. To our surprise, almost every candidate mentions the blog as a reason they want to work at Zapier.
- **Blog posts about your company:** Similar to No. 4, much of our blog writing is about how we work (like this book). The people who connect with how we work get excited enough to search for how they can work alongside us.
- **Ask teammates to help with sourcing:** Some companies take a really aggressive stance and [mine every employees' social networks](#) for potential job candidates. I haven't found this to be necessary. Instead, simply ask teammates to help spread the word and with the goal of getting an awesome new teammate. Often times, people are excited about working

with and helping pick out their new teammate so including them in the process is a net benefit to all.

- **Job boards:** As a last resort, job boards can be a source of candidates. Often these have bottom of the barrel candidates who are constantly job hunting and mostly looking for any job, not your job. But you can occasionally strike gold.
- **Share, share, share:** Use Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, AngelList and any channel you have access to to let people know that you're hiring. The more spread you can get, the more likely your job post will stumble across the right person's desk.

Sourcing candidates is often a harder task for remote teams than you'd think. Since you don't have global connections, you're a small brand, and local ties can be hard to come by, too, it can be hard to get the word out about your company and your positions. Take advantage of every channel you can find to get the word out and keep track of where the good candidates come from. Then make sure to utilize those in the future.

Here are the ways our 18 employees found the Zapier job opening they filled:

- [Micah Bennett](#) - Personal network
- [James Carr](#) - Personal network
- [Brian Cooksey](#) - Personal network
- [Danny Schreiber](#) - Social media
- [Jess Byrne](#) - "is hiring!" link
- [Chris Peters](#) - Personal outreach
- [Alison Groves](#) - Product Hunt
- [Justin Deal](#) - Independent research and friend suggestion
- [Brandon Galbraith](#) - Hacker News
- [Rob Golding](#) - "is hiring!" link
- [Matthew Guay](#) - Personal outreach

- [Andrew Gosnell](#) - Referral
- [Jason Kotenko](#) - Hacker News
- [Thomas Hils](#) - SupportOps.co
- [Joe Stych](#) - Personal outreach
- [Lindsay Brand](#) - SupportOps.co
- [Steve Molitor](#) - Personal outreach
- [Craig Labenz](#) - Open source

P.S. These are all really cool people. You should say hello to them. :-)

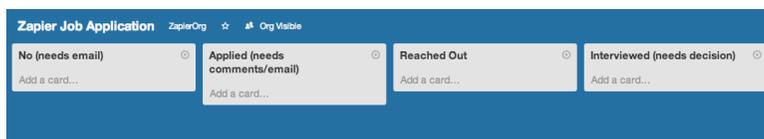
## Hiring a Remote Employee

If you've done everything up to this point, then you should start to see applicants roll in. This is where the real challenge starts—it's time to make the hire. First, you'll need to sort through dozens, hundreds, and maybe thousands of applicants to find the person you want.

### 1. Sort Through Applicants in a Project Management Tool

We've borrowed heavily from how [DoSomething runs hiring with Trello](#). I suggest managing the hiring pipeline in a project management tool—Launchpad LA, for example, [uses Asana](#)—so that all in your company can see the candidates, comment on their application and feel involved in the process. As a remote team, you don't get those in-person, team conversations about candidates, so finding one spot to have those chats puts everyone on the same page.

We set up a Trello board with columns for “No”, “Applied”, “Reached out” and “Interviewed (needs decision)”.



Candidates email their application to an email address ([jobs@zapier.com](mailto:jobs@zapier.com)) and then a Zapier integration [automatically creates a Trello card](#) for candidates in the “Applied” column. The card contains a link to the applicant’s initial email, which I later use to quickly reply to those individuals (when the email initially arrives in my inbox, it’s auto-archived).

Next, we nominate someone to run point for hiring for that position. They are in charge of all the initial screening and making sure the ball never gets dropped in the hiring process. This role is *important*. Without someone filling this role, it’s highly likely that candidates will get slow response times and the ball will be dropped. I know we had this happen before having someone assume this role.

That said, just because someone is running point for the position doesn’t mean you don’t want other teammates involved in the hiring process. In fact, the exact opposite, you want to get other teammates involved to independently evaluate candidates to help reduce bias.

To do this make the Trello job board available to everyone internally. Use [Zapier Trello automation](#) to notify teammates when new applicants come in. Invite them to leave comments on the card—this is to replace those in-person chats.

Next, the point person selects a handful of people for an interview call and lets the other candidates know that they are no longer in the running for the position.

## 2. Reject Unqualified Applicants Quickly and Kindly

It's always best to let them know as soon as possible so they can continue with their search. It's also a polite thing to do. Here's a rough template we use though you'll want to customize this towards the candidate a bit more:

Hi John,

Thanks for your email! Loved hearing about [insert something interesting they mentioned from the app]. That said, we're moving forward with other candidates at this point.

Best of luck and hopefully you'll stay in touch. We post new positions periodically and would love to see your name again.

Wade

The email is short, personal, lets the individual know they are no longer in the running for the position, but also invites them to stay in touch for the future. After all, these are candidates that are excited about your company and may be a better fit for a different role down the road. Best to part ways as friendly as possible.

## 3. Invite Top Candidates to a Video Call Interview

You'll want to schedule a follow up call with the top candidates. These are best done synchronously so make the most of your time and schedule these back-to-back. Doing so helps you more easily compare candidates, as well.

Pay special attention to how well the applicant communicates during this part of the process.

- Do they suggest dates and times with time zones?
- Do they send over calendar invites? Do those have time zones attached?
- Do they offer multiple ways to connect, such as phone, Skype and Google Hangout?

Effective communication is so key in a remote position that these little things are a sign of a person who might be a great fit.

More potential warning signs are individuals who are poor at following up via email, forget when the interview was scheduled, or aren't flexible with an interview time.

[Matthew Guay](#), who recently joined us, is a U.S. expat based in Bangkok, which means his work hours are completely opposite of ours. But during the interview process, he was more than happy to stay up late in order to meet our whole team on a conference call. His quickness to schedule and flexibility played a role in his hiring.

## 4. Put Top Candidates to the Test with a Project

After these video call interviews, a few candidates have likely emerged as the strongest applicants. At this point we like to put them to the test. Depending on the role, we'll devise a task that is of moderate difficulty and indicative of the types of activities they'll do on a day-to-day basis.

For engineers, that might be using the [Zapier Developer Platform](#) to add a new service. For marketing, that may be writing a blog post in collaboration with someone on the team.

If it's obvious that this isn't necessary, we might skip this step. Though it's often a good way to get a feel for working together even for great candidates.

More often than not, the task requires interaction with folks on the team. That way you'll get a sense of how they communicate and collaborate.

The test should only take a few hours. We want to be cognizant of everyone's time. If it is more than a few hours we always pay the candidate for their time.

## 5. Arrange Finalists to Meet the Whole Team



If that goes well, we have the candidate meet the team. This happens via a [GoToMeeting](#) (previously Google Hangouts, but it has a 15-person limit). We ask the candidate to prepare a short lightning talk on a topic of their choice. It can be anything.

The hangout starts with a brief round of intros and then the applicant gives the presentation followed by Q&A.

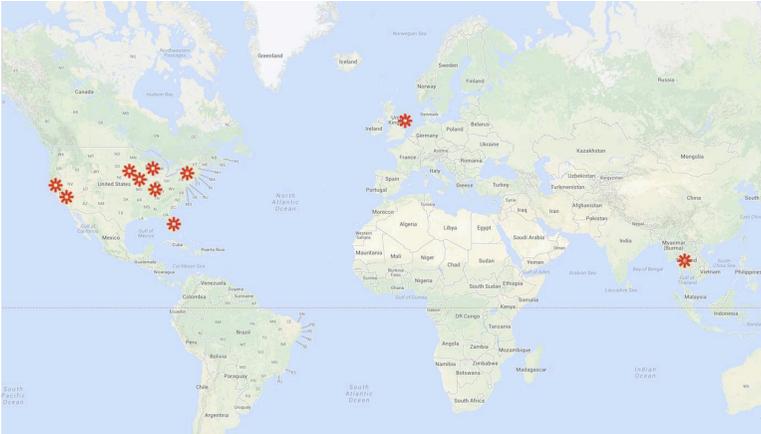
This part of the process has been key. It allows everyone on the team

to interact with the person at least once. It also allows the applicant to meet everyone and get an inside look at how we operate. This goes a long way for helping us evaluate the applicant and the applicant evaluate us. The best applicants will likely have their pick of places to work, so we want to put our best foot forward, too.

After the GoToMeeting, I send a quick email to everyone on the team asking them what they thought. We rarely use email for all team collaboration and instead opt for [Slack](#), Trello or our internal blog which are all accessible internally. In this case, email is best since it's private and allows us to be more candid about our feelings toward the applicant.

If all goes well up to this point we usually make a job offer.

## More Remote Hiring Resources



One thing you'll note is that we never meet the individual in-person. For our first five hires, we met candidates in-person. We found this was helpful but ultimately wasn't critical. What it did add was cost, coordination headache and time. If you wanted to interview three people face-to-face that could take up to two weeks

to manage. The first person in the interview process would then be waiting two or three weeks before knowing if they got the job or not. So now we do everything via Google Hangouts, email and GoToMeeting. This works swimmingly.

If you're interested in how others hire in remote teams here are how companies I admire do this:

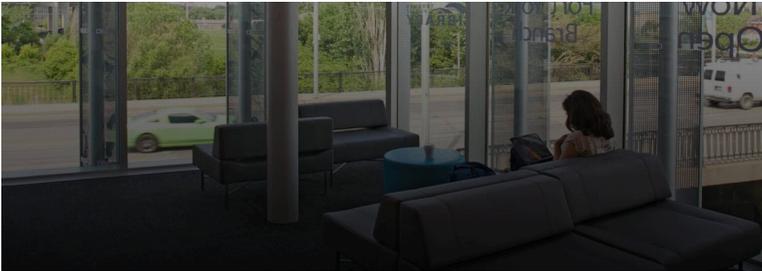
- **Leo Widrich** on [how Buffer hires](#)
- **Gregory Ciotti** of Help Scout on [how to make hiring less of a headache](#)
- **Tommy Morgan** on [how Treehouse hires developers](#)
- **Alex Turnbull** on [how Groove hires top talent](#)

---

*Written by Wade Foster.*

# Chapter 4: How Successful Remote Teams Evaluate Employees

*A look inside Automattic, GitHub, and Help Scout*



*This chapter was contributed by Automattic Happiness Engineer Jeremy DuVall*

During my first full day of work at [Automattic](#), the only thing running through my mind was “Am I going to get fired?”

That’s an unusual feeling, especially when you’re hours into a new job. To clarify, this had nothing to do with Automattic or any of my coworkers. They were all friendly and welcoming, encouraging me to take my time getting adjusted to my first remote position.

Still, I had this lingering fear in the back of my mind: I was used to seeing my coworkers and supervisors on a daily basis, and using in-person skills to feel out how I was doing. Now, I was missing those seemingly crucial cues, and that made me fear the worst.

I was suffering through [Imposter Syndrome](#)—the feeling that I was a fraud, that I wasn't worthy of my position, and that sooner or later, someone was going to find out.

I had a sneaking suspicion that I couldn't be the only one who felt this way. After interviewing leaders at established remote teams, my suspicions were confirmed: This feeling is largely normal. “The struggle is real; those first few days working remote seem so awkward, and you'll spend at least 10% of your time wondering if you're doing the right thing,” confirms [Greg Ciotti](#), Content Strategist at helpdesk company [Help Scout](#).

So I started thinking: Is there any way to prevent Imposter Syndrome in remote teams? And what's it like for managers who need to evaluate these conflicted remote employees? Here are some best tricks of the trade from companies like [Help Scout](#), [GitHub](#), and [Automattic](#).

## Make New Teammates Feel Welcome from the Start

Remote environments can be intimidating for new employees, particularly if they're coming from a traditional, co-location office setting. One practice that helped me early on at Automattic was having a veteran employee as a “buddy” to help me navigate the uncharted waters.

I'm not alone in my desire for camaraderie in remote workplace. Ciotti recommends the buddy approach to help new employees feel welcome. There's even science indicating that [employees who have friends at work](#) “get sick less often, suffer fewer accidents, and change jobs less frequently.”

Ciotti offers five tangible takeaways for buddies paired up with new employees:

1. Shoot the new employee a quick email before they start to welcome them to the team. Don't use email? [Slack](#) or any other communication tool will work.
2. Offer to be available for any random questions—even the ones that seem silly. (Speaking from experience, new people tend to hesitate on asking genuinely important questions.)
3. Check-in with them on your team's chat app, such as Slack, every couple of days in their first week to see how it's going. (My buddy and I checked in with each other once every two weeks, always on a Friday.)
4. Tell them about your team retreats or what it's like to hang out with the team in-person. (In my case, my buddy and I chatted about "Grand Meetups," the annual all-person gathering at Automattic.)
5. Share some "unwritten rules" like the difference between the #general and #offtopic communication channels in Slack. (Similarly, my buddy enlightened me on Automattic's #BurritoFriday tradition.)

Above all, buddies should make new employees feel comfortable and act as a go-to for questions employees might otherwise feel embarrassed to ask.

## Measure Output, Not Input

[Matt Mullenweg](#), CEO of Automattic, has some strong doubts about the normal 9-to-5 grind. "If someone shows up in the morning dressed appropriately and isn't drunk or asleep at his desk, we assume he's working. If he's making spreadsheets and to-do lists, we assume he's working really hard. Unfortunately, none of this gets at what an employee actually creates during the day," Mullenweg says in a [Harvard Business Review post](#).

One potential solution to this conundrum? Have managers hover over employees either by roaming up and down the aisles in a traditional sense or obsessively checking to see when someone logs in or out. According to Ciotti, that's the shortcut to burnout. "Fires only burn when they have room to breathe, and you'll end up suffocating enthusiasm, motivation, and camaraderie by looming over people all day, every day."

"You'll end up suffocating enthusiasm, motivation, and camaraderie by looming over people all day, every day." - Greg Ciotti, Content Strategist at Help Scout

Instead, productivity at Automattic is measured by output, not input.

"At Automattic we focus on what you create, not whether you live up to some ideal of the 'good employee,'" explains Mullenweg. For developers, that might mean looking at how many commits they've had over a given time period. For the support staff, that could be total number of tickets answered. The underlying message is to find a metric outside of hours spent to evaluate productivity.

## Look to the Team for Feedback

When compiling employee feedback, it's crucial to remember that the relationship isn't just between supervisor and employee. Each employee has a string of relationships with their fellow co-workers. [Phil Haack](#), engineering manager at [GitHub](#), relies heavily on this team atmosphere to evaluate performance. He explains that when you create a strong team, it's easy to see who isn't pulling their weight.

For reviews, Haack asks each employee to send him a list of three to five co-workers they would like peer feedback from. He then asks

those co-workers to provide feedback for the individual in three categories: Start, Stop, and Continue. Each box should focus on behaviors that match the title (behaviors someone might want to stop, for example). Haack adds the boxes aren't mandatory. "If you have three categories, the temptation is to put something in each. You might not feel very strongly that someone needs to stop doing something." In that case, employees can just leave a box blank.

Haack takes those bits of feedback and distills them down into major takeaways, combining duplicates and making sure feedback is worded in a useful manner. The end result is a collection of behavior-based feedback from individuals you work with daily.

Two elements are crucial. First, the format (Start, Stop, and Continue) provides a framework that makes a difficult task (giving peer feedback) easier. The main purpose is to help employees organize their thoughts. Second, the feedback should be focused on behaviors, not personalities. The former is something an employee can improve; the latter isn't.

## Ask for Self-Evaluations

When performing a review, Haack considers three points of view:

1. His own opinions.
2. Thoughts from co-workers.
3. A self-evaluation from the actual employee.

Self-evaluations often get a bad rap. As professional relationship author [Keith Ferrazzi](#) explains in an article on [Harvard Business Review](#), employees tend to fall in one of two traps (potentially both). First, they become a victim of the Overconfidence Effect, which causes them to overestimate their competence in a given area. Second, they're likely to make a [Fundamental Attribution](#)

**Error**, pinning their successes on talent and wisdom while failing to acknowledge environmental factors.

To combat this, Haack uses all three points of view. The goal of the self-assessment isn't just to see how great everyone perceives they are, but rather to see if the three points of view match up. "The point of that was to help me understand how people saw themselves, how others saw them, and how I saw them and see if there's a big disconnect there," he explains.

Self-evaluations have their flaws when used as the sole assessment method. However, in conjunction with team reviews and the opinions of the team leader, they help to complete the 360-degree view. They also reassure employees that their voice is being heard.

## **Provide Feedback Often**

"I spent a lot of the six months hoping I didn't get fired." That's not something you want to hear from one of your employees, but it's a real conversation Haack had with someone during their first official feedback session.

If employees are more familiar working in an office environment where they receive feedback daily, the silence in a remote position can be the perfect breeding ground for Imposter Syndrome. It's easy to assume the worst about your work when you don't hear otherwise.

Everyone I spoke with for this chapter emphasized the benefits of giving regular feedback outside of formal reviews. Why? Because regular feedback lets employees know where they stand, gets everyone on the same page, and reduces the chance of a surprise during a more formal review.

"We hold the opinion that you should share praise and own blame." - Greg Ciotti, Content Strategist at Help

## Scout

For Haack at GitHub, he has regular one-on-one meetings with his distributed team (they live all over the world) using a video conferencing software called [Blue Jeans](#). At Help Scout, team leads have scheduled weekly reviews with everyone in their department. They chat about what has gone well since the last check-in and what's looming on the horizon.

Regardless of whether you check-in with employees daily through a chat app, schedule weekly video sessions, or meet in-person monthly, the key is to provide continuous feedback rather than combining it all into one surprising review at the end of the year. Ciotti does offer one important caveat, "We hold the opinion that you should share praise and own blame." Hold performance-oriented discussions in private, not in public.

## Trust

One common thread that runs deep across every method of managing a remote team: trust. Employees need to trust that their managers are looking out for their best interest. Managers need to trust that their employees are engaged and motivated at work. Part of this trust is built during the hiring process—selecting candidates who are self-motivated—and the rest is built over time with each positive interaction.

Just like in-person office cultures, remote office cultures can differ wildly. For those of you who work remotely, I'd love to hear any specific tactics you've found helpful in the comments section!

---

*Written by Automattic Happiness Engineer [Jeremy DuVall](#)*

*Credits: Photo courtesy [Kevin Morris](#).*

# Communicating in a Remote Team

*Including:*

- How to End Internal Emails and Communicate Effectively in a Remote Team
- How to Build Strong Relationships in a Remote Team
- How to Run a Remote Team Meeting
- How to Run a Company Retreat for a Remote Team

# Chapter 5: How to End Internal Emails and Communicate Effectively in a Remote Team

*This chapter was contributed by Automattic Happiness Engineer Jeremy DuVall*



“Communication is oxygen.”

That portion of the [Automattic creed](#) has stuck with me from the start. After reading the creed during my first week of remote work, I had a surface-level understanding. Now, after a year of working with over 250 other individuals spread across the globe, I understand it even more. In many ways, communication is the lifeblood of an organization. Without discussion and collaboration between individuals, little innovation would take place.

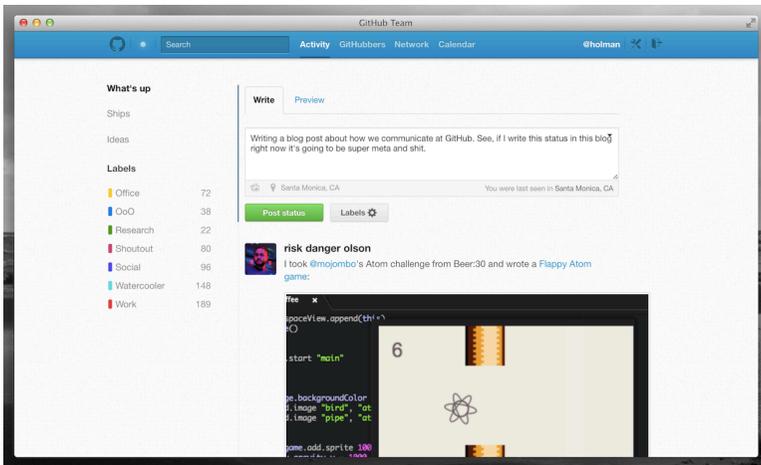
It’s easy to emphasize the importance of communication in remote work since employees can’t meet by the proverbial water cooler. But, it’s just as important when employees are working in the same

room—launches have to be scheduled, bugs have to be squashed, and relationships must be built.

There are a [slew of tools out there](#) for communicating, including Skype, Slack, and HipChat to name a few. However, in some cases, the normal tools just don't get the job done, leading companies to improvise and create their own systems that work. Let's take a look at four companies that have cooked up their own communication tool and three takeaways to apply to your organization.

Related: [“The Best Team Chat App for Your Company”](#)

## GitHub Built “Team” to Learn What Everyone is Working On



Imagine a team of 240 employees with over 60% working remotely. Now, remove all managers. Finally, imagine deploying code [50 times a day on average](#). Welcome to [GitHub](#).

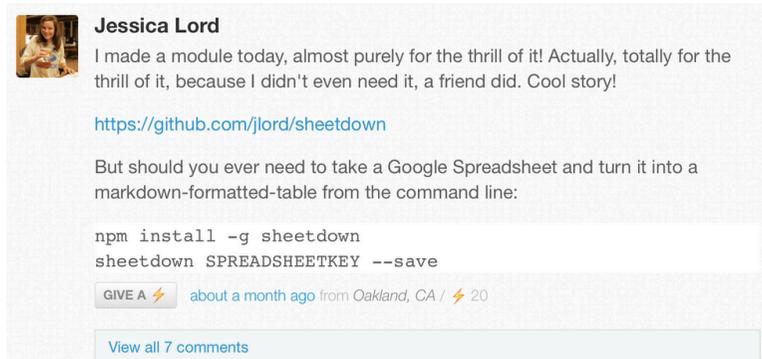
GitHub, the company who maintains the best [interface for sharing code](#) amongst co-workers, colleagues, and complete strangers,

certainly has a unique setup. On top of the notable team structure, GitHub also deviates from mainstream business operations in that the company prefers text to voice meetings. As [Zach Holman](#), an engineer at GitHub, [explains on his blog](#), text offers two main benefits.

- There is a record of conversation. Particularly, since most of the staff is working remotely, having a stored record of conversations makes it easier for everyone to catch up on what they might have missed.
- You're able to editorialize your thoughts before pressing *return* on your keyboard. In voice meetings, we have an inkling of the direction we want to go, but our ideas often aren't fully formulated leading us to use words like "ah" and "um" as fillers. Through text, employees can be sure they're projecting their ideas in a clear, concise manner.

To make all of this text chat possible, they use over 185 rooms in the popular collaboration software [Campfire](#), Holman shared in March on his blog, to discuss everything from troubleshooting bugs to passing along hilarious GIFs and chatting about health insurance. However, with all of the chatter going on amongst various rooms, it became hard to answer two pressing questions related to the business: "What are people working on today?" and "What shipped today?"

To answer these two questions, GitHub created their own communication tool [called Team](#). It can be thought of as an internal Twitter/blog containing a mixture of work-related content and personal information. On a given day, Team might have around 12 posts from various employees.



**Jessica Lord**  
I made a module today, almost purely for the thrill of it! Actually, totally for the thrill of it, because I didn't even need it, a friend did. Cool story!

<https://github.com/flord/sheetdown>

But should you ever need to take a Google Spreadsheet and turn it into a markdown-formatted-table from the command line:

```
npm install -g sheetdown
sheetdown SPREADSHEETKEY --save
```

**GIVE A ⚡** about a month ago from Oakland, CA / ⚡ 20

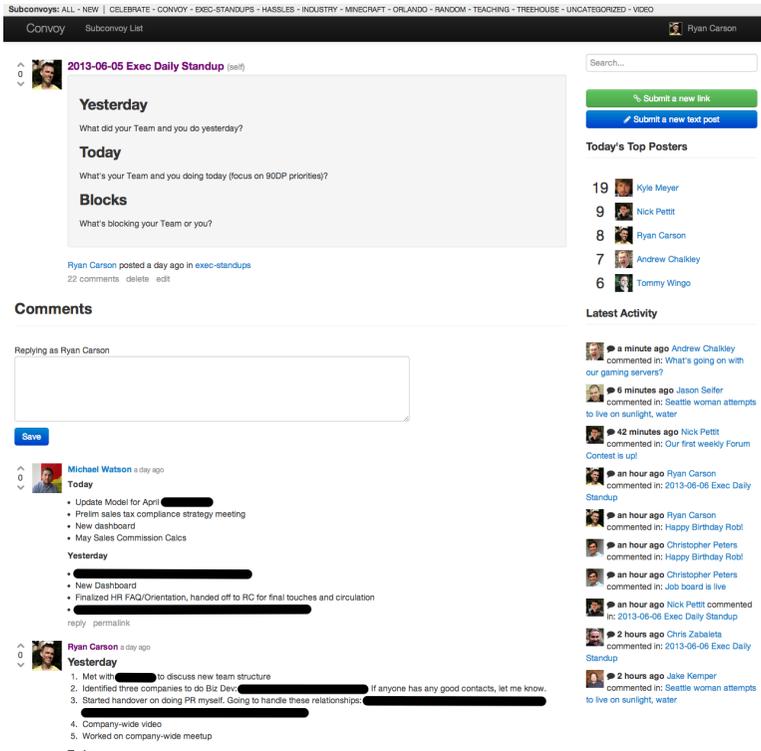
[View all 7 comments](#)

For GitHub, the combination of Campfire, Team, and of course, GitHub for sharing code has largely replaced email while still allowing everyone to communicate and catch-up with conversations over text.

“Something I did want to point out is that there was only one email sent out to the entire company at large: it was an email about next summer’s all-hands summit,” writes Holman in a post titled “[A Day of Communication at GitHub](#)”.

**Related:** “[Effective Meeting Tactics employed by Execs at LinkedIn, Amazon and Asana](#)”

# Treehouse Constructed a Reddit Clone to Bubble Up Important Items



Treehouse, another remote company of more than 50 team members, uses a variety of communication methods depending on the urgency of the request. For example, they use Campfire for daily banter, email for items that need an answer within the next day or two, and instant messaging for more urgent matters that need addressing within the next hour.

With all of the available tools, they still found a hole in their communication. With Campfire, it was hard to distinguish between important items and chit-chat. When employees were reading through

the backscroll, news about a child's birthday appeared to have the same level of importance as crucial business announcements.

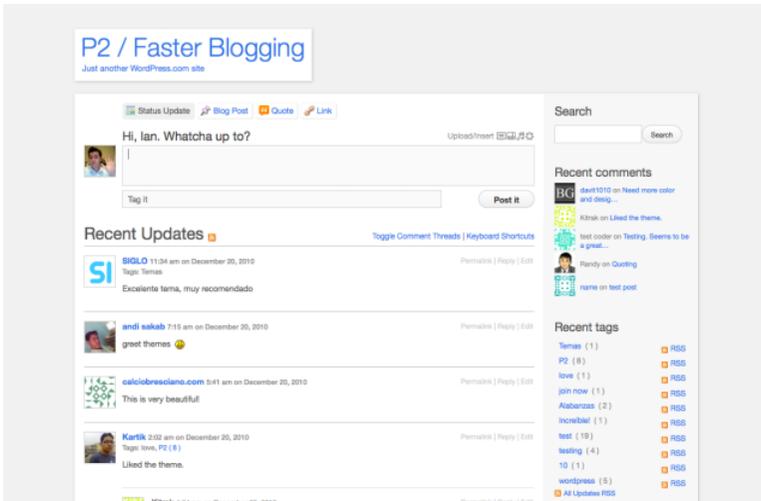
To solve this issue, the Treehouse team [created Canopy \(formerly Convoy\)](#), a clone of the social news site [Reddit](#). Any employee can post to Canopy, which has around 15 posts published daily. The topics can range from business-related items to random chatter. As opposed to their other means of communication that generally warrant a response, posts in Canopy don't require action. They're meant to inform.

They've also begun using the tool for [standup meetings](#). CEO and co-founder [Ryan Carson](#) posts an opening thread with the day's date and the title "Daily Standup" (for example, 2014-12-18 Daily Standup) and then emails a link to participants. When they have time, appropriate parties post a comment with their daily update.

Carson and the team noticed two main benefits immediately. First, threaded comments were way more efficient than email replies, particularly for the Daily Standup. Second, posting information out in the open in Canopy created a sense of transparency within the organization.

"I think everyone feels like they can access whatever information they want and it's not being held back by anyone to advance their personal politics," Carson explains.

## Automattic Created P2, a Microblog on its Own Platform



The company behind [WordPress.com](#), [Jetpack](#), and other popular blogging tools previously relied on IRC, Skype, and email for all company communication. Those tools got the job done for quite awhile. Eventually, as you might expect from a company involved with producing the most popular blogging software on the planet, [Automattic](#) began using an internal blog featuring long posts and comments. However, the length of posts made it hard to catch up and many employees forgot to visit the internal blog regularly.

To solve this issue, [Automattic set out to build a tool](#) that removed the friction from publishing and chronicling daily activity. The result was [P2](#), a sort of microblog where the post box sat on the homescreen making publishing quick and painless.

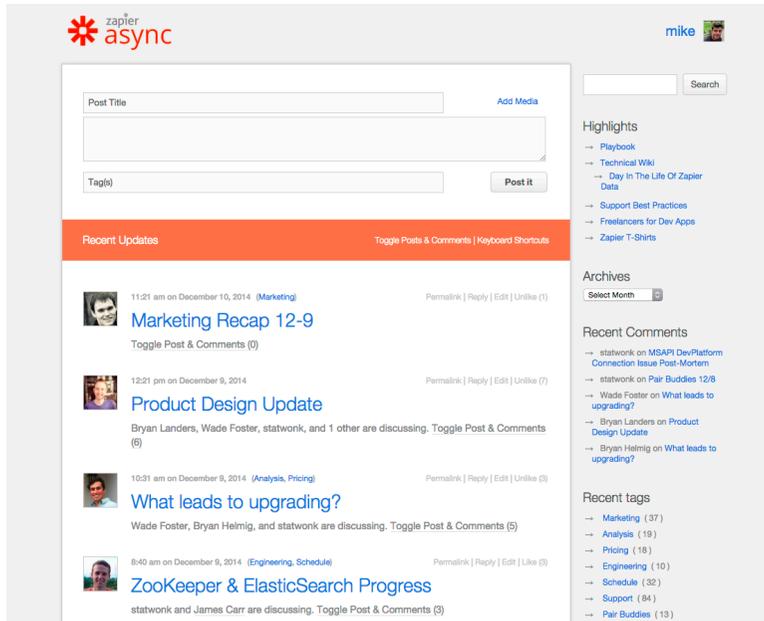
The tool offered some immediate benefits. First, P2 provides real-time updates without having to reload the page. You can post a status update and immediately watch as comments and reactions

came in. Second, since P2 works well on mobile devices and desktops, employees have access to information anywhere and everywhere. Lastly, like Treehouse, Automattic found that opening up information to anyone within the company further reinforced the trusting internal atmosphere. Any employee, new or old, could pull up previous P2 conversations and chime in on current conversations when they had something to add.

P2 has continued to develop over the years and has become a mainstay in inner-workings at Automattic. The company now has well over 150 internal P2s including those focused on specific projects and others devoted to sharing daily banter and awesome GIFs (which are embedded easily into the page).

Since the tool has been so successful within the company, Automattic has made it available to everyone. Anyone can start a blog on WordPress.com and [enable the P2 theme](#). It also comes in [the self-hosted variety as well](#). The tool is currently undergoing an upgrade and [will be transformed into a plugin called O2](#), making it easier for developers to build extensions and themes to integrate with the product.

## Zapier Utilizes a Customized Version of P2



Like many other companies, Zapier uses team collaboration and messaging app Slack for daily banter. While the chat tool certainly gets the job done, CEO and co-founder Wade Foster found it was ill-suited for longer discussions.

“It’s really noisy so longer running conversations or things that need more visibility tend to get buried quickly,” says Foster. To solve this problem, the team began using what they call Async, an internal version of the P2 tool used by Automattic. Async replaced @ team emails that were intended to keep everyone abreast of larger topics.

The team quickly made some adjustments to P2 to fit their needs. First, they added a “Like” button so team members could acknowl-

edge a post without commenting. Second, they added some CSS customizations to modify the P2 theme to fit their internal brand. Finally, as you might expect, they made a Zapier integration to [automatically notify them of P2 activity in Slack](#).

Zapier currently has one internal P2 that gets about 30 updates a week. The posts tend to be 400-800 words long, but conversations are easy to follow since threaded comments are enabled automatically. According to Foster, Async has offered a tremendous boost in visibility across teams.

“The engineering team does a ton in GitHub so there’s good visibility there but the marketing and support team don’t spend much time there,” Foster says. “So the engineering team will surface the best of GitHub in Async so that the whole team has perspective on what’s happening there.”

## Improve Your Internal Communication



You don’t need to start from scratch to create a communication system similar to those used by GitHub, Treehouse, Automattic, and Zapier. [Telescope](#), for example, makes it easy to create a Reddit

clone for your company. As mentioned above, anyone can [set up a P2 for their company](#), too.

Regardless of the tool you're trying to build, in learning about the examples above, some overarching principles of communication became clear.

1. **Visibility is key.** Treehouse, Automattic, and Zapier all acknowledged that sharing information across teams is a huge element of their success.
2. **Important topics should bubble to the surface.** Like Team, the tool from GitHub that tries to answer the two most important questions of the day, internal tools should help employees to separate out the important issues from the noise.
3. **Conversation is encouraged and following along is simple.** With Canopy, Treehouse found that threaded comments were much easier than emails for daily meetings. Additionally, other employees could easily follow the conversation as it happened. Communication tools should make it easy for dialogue to occur and everyone to stay on top of what is going on.

---

*Written by Automattic Happiness Engineer [Jeremy DuVall](#)*

*Automattic team photo from [Matt Mullenweg's blog](#).*

# Chapter 6: How to Build Strong Relationships in a Remote Team



*This chapter was contributed by Exist cofounder Belle Beth Cooper*

If you work in a remote team, one of the aspects you quickly notice is the importance of communication. Finding the best ways to communicate with your team is imperative when you're not working face-to-face, because you're missing most—if not all—of the context of each person's situation.

If you're in an office with your teammates, for instance, you'll notice if someone is especially quiet and withdrawn. And if that's a common behavior pattern, you'll know that it's a tip-off that they didn't sleep well last night and need some space, or that they're especially stressed and could use a chat to share their concerns.

You'll also notice details like noise levels in the office, or distracting roadworks noise outside. You'll be able to tell when someone's really focused on their work versus when they're open to interruptions.

As humans we're great at picking up on these signals. We practice this every day in our interactions, and use people's body language and tone of voice to inform the way we communicate with them.

But in a remote team you lose a lot of that context, so you need to find ways to make up for it. Let's take a look at some ways to build strong connections with your teammates when they're far away.

## Building Rapport Remotely

When you start a new job in a remote team, it can feel very strange. Although it might be less confronting than working in a new office full of people you don't know, it can also be more isolating, as you don't have an easy way to get to know everyone quickly—especially those you don't work with directly.

Eventually, you'll make the rounds and have some interaction with everyone, and perhaps even meet them in person at a [company retreat](#) like Zapier holds every few months. But how do you go about building a rapport with people you've never really met?

Let's start with some standard methods for building rapport, and look at how we can apply them to a remote working situation.

Robin Dreeke is the lead instructor of the FBI's Counterintelligence Training Center, and author of *It's Not All About Me: Ten Techniques for Building Quick Rapport With Anyone*. In his book, Dreeke explains some of the [most basic ways to build rapport](#) with others, including smiling, tilting your chin lower so you're not looking down on them, matching their handshake strength, and slowing down your speech so you come across as being more credible.

All good tips, but not very useful in a remote setting. So what *can* we apply to a remote situation to help us build strong relationships with our teammates? Well, there are few things Dreeke suggests that we can use.

First, Dreeke points out that meeting someone new can be overwhelming when you have no time constraint on your conversation. Because we're **wired to look for threats** in any new situation, our first reaction to meeting someone is to be wary of them until we start building up some rapport. Establishing an artificial time constraint can help ease the pressure of a conversation with someone new, according to Dreeke.

If you're setting up phone or video calls to meet your new teammates, try setting a time limit of 15 minutes.

Another tip from Dreeke is to validate others by listening to them and suspending your ego. "True validation coupled with ego suspension means that you have no story to offer, that you are there simply to hear theirs," he writes.

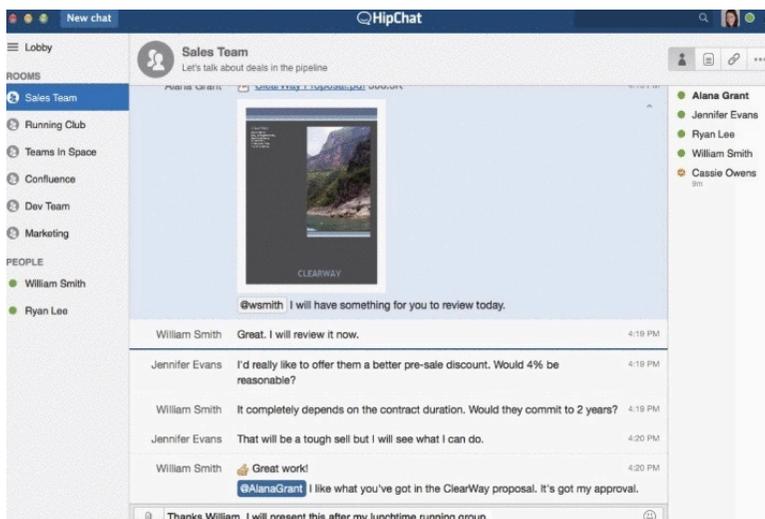
We **love to talk about ourselves**, especially to good listeners, but this means we're often ready to respond with our own related stories when our conversation partner finishes talking. According to Dreeke, ego suspension means putting aside our own desires to contribute to the conversation, and instead asking **short, open questions** like *how, when, and why*.

**Studies have shown** that listening carefully and asking the person you're talking with to expand on what they're saying will make you more likable and more likely to be chosen for future conversations.

So, in summary:

- set a finish time before starting a conversation with someone new
- listen without interrupting or sharing your own stories
- ask short, open questions

## Relying on Text the Right Way



Your team might rely on tools like Skype or [Sqwiggle](#) for video and voice chats, which will give you a chance to use those rapport-building strategies we just discussed. Voice and video calls can help you feel more in-touch with your team, and avoid the issues of asynchronous communication like time lags, or misunderstandings.

But you'll likely spend a lot of your day communicating with text. Whether it's in [Slack](#), [HipChat](#), [Campfire](#) shared documents, emails, or GitHub issues, text tends to be the most convenient way to keep in touch with your teammates without interrupting them.

***Related:** Looking for a team chat app? Check out our roundup of “[the Best Team Chat Apps for Your Company](#)”*

Effective written communication is such an important part of remote working that it's often part of what remote companies look

for when hiring. For instance, here's what Buffer COO Leo Widrich [says about hiring](#):

The main way we try to gauge culture fit in practice is by looking at the **wording of each email** and seeing how well it is in line with our culture. Especially since we're a remote team, written communication gets a lot of weight and gauging emotions from it is important for us.

In a remote setting, you need to be able to get your point across clearly and simply, show empathy and understanding, and be efficient to avoid wasted time since you may be waiting across timezones for your team to reply anyway.

Here are three suggestions for connecting with remote team members through text:

## 1. Stay Up-To-Date

When your teammates are working on the other side of the world you get used to waking up or coming back from lunch to a full inbox and messages flowing in from your team chat, shared documents, and various other places. This can be overwhelming, so finding ways to keep on top of what's going on is imperative for communicating efficiently with each other.

The distributed [Stripe](#) team [shares most internal emails](#), which means everyone has a very full inbox to work through daily. With over 428 email lists in the company, there's a lot to organize at Stripe. Last December the team [shared their tools](#) for scaling transparent email.

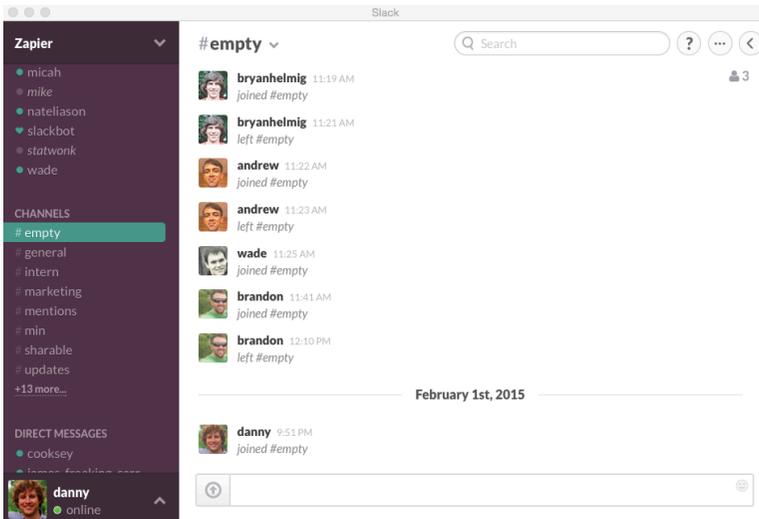
One of the approaches Stripe takes is to create archive lists where otherwise irrelevant emails are CC'd to. This means if you're setting up a meeting with someone you don't have to flood everyone's

inboxes with your back-and-forth emails, but later on everyone has access to that information if they need it. Here's how Stripe's CTO, Greg Brockman, [explains it](#):

The goal isn't to share things that would otherwise be secret: it's to unlock the wealth of information that would otherwise be accidentally locked up in a few people's inboxes. In general, if you are debating including an archive list, you should include it.

(Buffer also uses a transparent email process. You can read about how it works [on the Buffer Open blog](#).)

Like many teams, Zapier uses Slack for team and one-on-one chats. Zapier team member [Jason Kotenko](#) came up with a clever way to stay on top of everything happening in the various Slack channels.



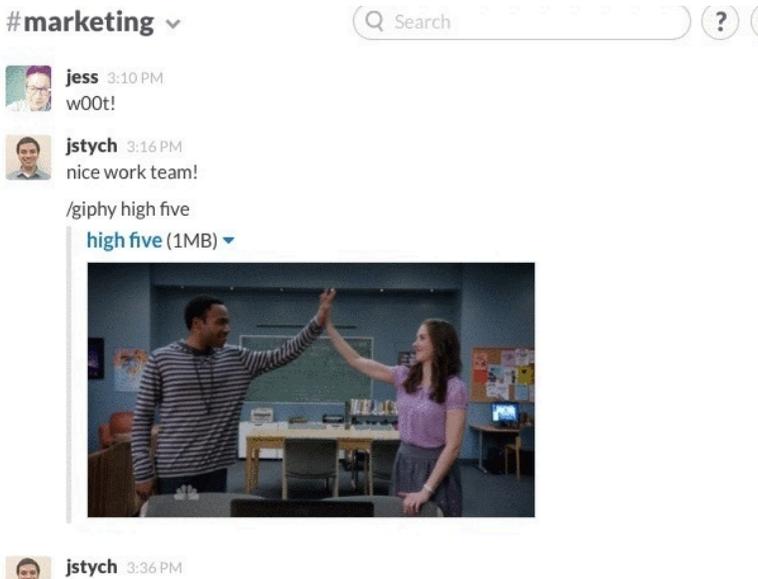
He created an empty channel where no discussion happens. This channel serves as a placeholder for team members who step away from their computer for a break. When they come back, each active

channel is bookmarked at the place they left so they can easily catch up on the discussions they missed.

## 2. Employ Emojis and GIFs

I've never been a big fan of emojis or emoticons. I use them sparingly compared to many people, and I always thought they seemed childish or unprofessional. Recently I read something that changed my mind, though.

I read an opinion from someone who explained she'd come around to the use of emoticons in emails. How else, she asked, can you imbue written communication with the emotion and nuance that's missing because you can't see and hear each other? I thought that was a great point.



GIFs probably fall into this category, as well. In my experience HipChat and Slack channels tend to lend themselves towards heavy

GIF use, and though I never got into it much myself, it can serve that all-important purpose of adding color, tone, and emotion to your communication.

### 3. Remember Hanlon's Razor

A razor is a concept used in philosophy to help us strip away possible explanations (hence the name) for a phenomenon. [Hanlon's razor](#) refers to the idea that we should always assume ignorance before malice. That is, if someone does something wrong, don't assume they purposely meant to hurt you. It's just as likely (perhaps more so) that they simply made a mistake.

This is especially important in situations where you're missing context. If you're communicating via text with co-workers who are multiple timezones away, try to always assume ignorance before malice if you have a misunderstanding.

In my own experience, this has happened several times. When I worked remotely for Buffer, I would often jump on a call with Leo to discuss something we'd disagreed about, only to realize we weren't on the same page at all and it had all been a misunderstanding.

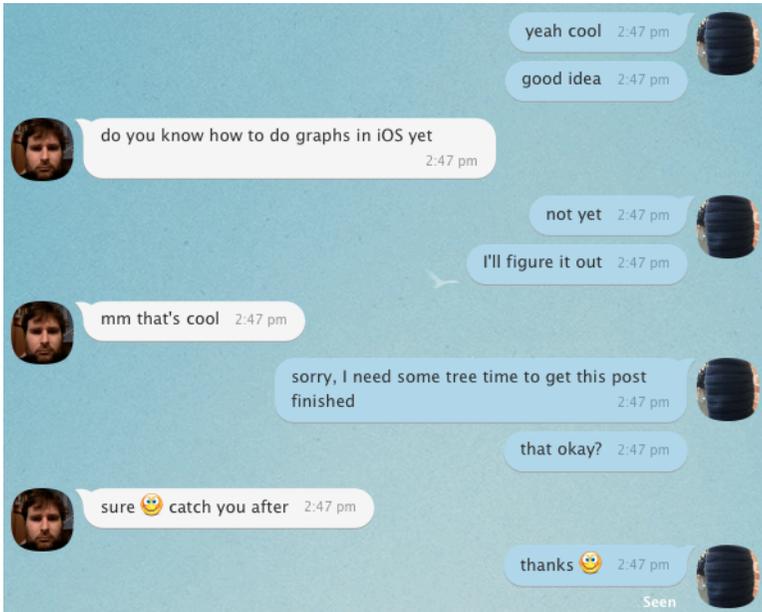
## Asserting Yourself When Needed

Perhaps the hardest, yet most obvious, way to compensate for the lack of context in remote communication is to be more forward and open than you normally would. As I mentioned in my example earlier, working with someone in an office makes it easier to pick up on their mood and know when they need some time alone. When you work remotely, you're going to bug people by chatting to them when they're not in the mood—it's unavoidable. Being respectful of others is just harder when you have less information to inform your decisions.

To cut down on that problem, we need to find ways to share that context explicitly with each other. A good way to go about this is to set up rules ahead of time.

Here's an example from my own experience: my co-founder [Josh Sharp](#) and I use [Viber](#) to communicate throughout the day. Sometimes it's a quick message here and there about grabbing some lunch or heading out for a meeting. Other times we have real-time chats for hours about our work. Because Viber is our "always on" channel for communicating, we have to explicitly remove ourselves from being available if we need uninterrupted work time. To avoid anyone getting offended by a frustrated request that they shut up for a while, we came up with a code word.

"Tree time" is what we call our uninterrupted work time. I don't remember where the name came from now, but I think it had something to do with a hypothetical scenario where one of us runs up a tree to get away from the other... Regardless, this is now our code word. If one of us asks the other for some "tree time", it means "don't get offended, but I'm finding it hard to concentrate and I really need some uninterrupted time to focus on what I'm doing."



Because we set up this rule ahead of time, we both know it's an option. Anytime we feel the need for some peace and quiet while we work, we know we can fall back on *tree time* without having to explain ourselves or worry about offending the other person because we don't want to chat right now.

Being open about what you need can be really hard. Most of us aren't used to being so upfront with our teammates. But keep in mind all the information *you* have about how you feel and your current needs that your teammates don't have.

It's up to you to fill in that gap so they can communicate with you in the best way.

Another good example of setting this up in advance is what [the Basecamp team](#) did when it introduced phone support. At first the support team was wary of adding the extra pressures of phone support to their workload. How do you do phone support when you work remotely from cafés?

Basecamp didn't want the support team to lose the benefits that come with remote working, so they set up some guidelines ahead of time. One is that team members can take breaks to work outside, in cafés, or just away from the phones and the rest of the team will cover for them. Making this rule in advance means team members know it's an option and can ask for it when they need some space.

---

We've covered a lot of ground in this chapter. Through all the examples I've included you can see that each company handles remote working in different ways. The most important thing I've learned from working remotely myself is that each team, and each member within that team, needs to find the way that works best for them.

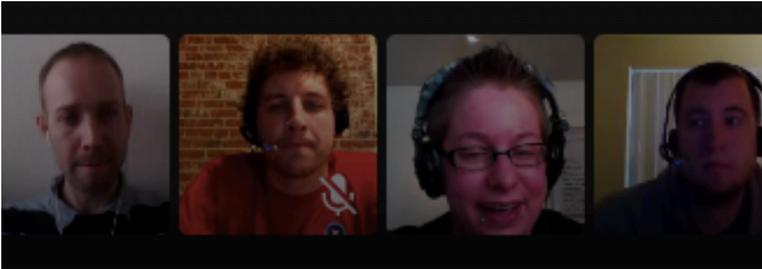
Experiment with different options to find what works best, but remember the most important lesson: find a way to share the context of your situation with your teammates. They need all the information you can give them to work with you in the best way they can.

---

*Written by Exist cofounder Belle Beth Cooper*

*Credits: Microphone photo courtesy Ryan McGuire*

# Chapter 7: How to Run a Remote Team Meeting



*This chapter is based on the current Zapier team size of 20. A previous version exists that reflects the operations of Zapier at a [team size of 6](#).*

Most meetings in the modern workplace are pointless. We’re meeting averse here at Zapier because we want avoid the distracting and unnecessary side meetings that happen every day in co-located teams.

That said, if done right, meetings can be an efficient way to work through potential problems and solutions. This is the case for a recurring “standup meeting” in a remote team, which gives teammates visibility into each other’s activities and helps remove any roadblocks in the way of a colleague’s responsibilities. It’s also a nice reminder that you work with people who have personalities bigger than their group chat personas would ever show.

Over the course of Zapier’s history we have revamped how we do our team standup meeting. After many—six at last count—unsuccessful iterations, we’ve finally found a meeting structure that drives meaningful discussion and visible results for the business.

Here's how we make the most of the weekly standup meeting:

## Time and Meeting Frequency



Each week at the teams discretion (we have 3 teams at Zapier - support, marketing, and product/engineering) there is a weekly meeting. There's also a weekly lightning talk / demo meeting which isn't useful for working through the current roadmap.

In the past, we tried the agile version of the 15-minute daily standup, but we found this was too frequent. Most days, team members didn't have enough new information to convey, making a majority of the meetings not useful. The daily format also required everyone to slot some part of their day, every day to chat. That was a lot of wasteful meeting overhead.

So we settled on a weekly meeting. One week between check-ins tends to supply the right amount of activity where a team meeting becomes useful.

The best time is determined by each team. Support likes to do 8am PST on Monday's because it kick starts the week nicely. Marketing does Tuesday at 3:30pm PST because it plays nicely with Thailand. Engineering likes to do 8am PST on Friday because it caps the week of work nicely.

## Meeting Structure

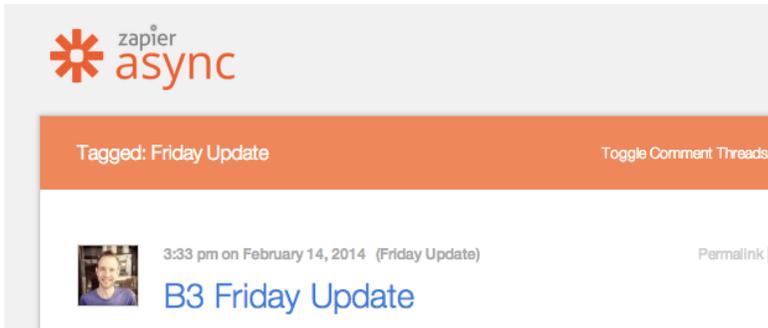
Past iterations of our weekly team meeting involved each team member verbally sharing the items they completed that week.

However, that was an inefficient way to do a meeting.

**Meetings are an awful place for information sharing.** When we did so, we spent the entire meeting talking at each other about tasks we completed rather than discussing tasks that could drive significant results for the company.

So we pulled a trick out of the Jeff Bezos playbook: [write your ideas out in complete sentences](#).

## Meeting Preparation



Before the weekly meeting, each teammate writes a short bit about what they are working on that week and what's on their mid term roadmap in a shared Google Doc.

- Things I said I'd do this week and their results
- Other issues that came up
- Things I'm doing next week

Teammates aren't required to read these posts before the meeting. Instead, the first 10 minutes of our meeting is complete silence. During the silence everyone reads through all the updates from each team member.

Information sharing happens more efficiently via written word. Another benefit is that it's documented if it's needed later.

Once everyone has had the chance to read through all the updates we then turn to the discussion.

## Meeting Discussion

Discussion in meetings is also a hard aspect to get right. In the past, we conducted a free-for-all for questions. This led to some people and projects naturally dominating the discussion. In the end, important questions weren't getting answered.

So we flipped the discussion aspect of the meeting on its head. Instead of allotting time for each person to answer questions about their weekly update, we give each person time to ask questions of their teammates that they formulated when reading the update posts.

Each person gets 5 minutes to ask questions, but they aren't required to use all 5 minutes if they don't need it. Since it's time-constrained, team members make sure to only ask pertinent questions and ask their questions in order of importance.

If discussions last longer than 5 minutes, it's a sign you either need to chat with the relevant parties later or your updates post didn't go into enough detail on that topic.

We also designate one person be the designated timekeeper. This way we don't waste time figuring out who is going to keep track of how long each person takes.

We also keep the order of team members consistent, though it does rotate. The question-asking order goes from nearest birthday to furthest birthday (at time of writing that means February birthdays go first, and January birthdays go last). This means you always know where in the rotation you come. (*Bonus: You also always know when your teammate's birthday is right around the corner*).

## Meeting Equipment

One aspect we initially undervalued was the right equipment. As long as you have an internet connection then you should be good to go for the team hangout, right?

It's not quite that simple. A poor internet connect and poor head-phone/microphone combination makes participation in the meeting almost impossible.

If at all unavoidable you should join the meeting on a strong internet connection; wired if possible. We also recommend teammates have a good set of headphones.

## Why Does This Work?

**Caveat:** I'm not a behavioral scientist. After running these meetings for several years, I've found this meeting structure works well for the following reasons.

1. It requires minimal preparation for everyone. All that's required before the meeting is a short update post on what you did that week.
2. The meeting focuses on answering specific questions individual team members have. Information sharing happens before the discussion starts so there is minimal time wasted giving information vocally.
3. It follows a specific structure. The structure allows the meeting to run quickly and smoothly. Little time gets wasted figuring out what should get talked about and who should be talking.
4. Everyone gets ample time to have their questions answered, rather than a dominant voice controlling the meeting. The 5-minute circle makes sure all voices get heard.

5. The 5-minute limit ensures the most important topics get discussed. It also makes sure everyone is succinct in asking questions and in answering them. There isn't time to be long-winded.
6. Proper use of tools. Slack, Google Docs, GoToMeeting, Google Calendar and Zapier all combine to make sure that the meeting runs smoothly.
7. Information gets documented. Because everyone writes their updates in Google Doc, the bulk of the meeting gets documented and saved for reference later.

## How Will This Scale?

Truthfully, I'm not sure.

We used to do this meeting with everyone in the company. Now we've sharded to team meetings. Anecdotally, it seems like once you get to 10 or more people the usefulness of a meeting like this starts to decline so it's time to think of ways to restructure teams to be smaller. You can likely do more people if the topic is pretty narrow. The more divergent the topics the more you might need to split.

Either way, we'll continue to experiment and tweak as we grow. Even without an answer for scaling, this is a worthwhile meeting structure to share since it has been effective for us for quite some time.

---

*Written by Wade Foster*

# Chapter 8: How to Run a Company Retreat for a Remote Team



*This chapter is based on the current Zapier team size of 20. A previous version exists that reflects the operations of Zapier at a [team size of 6](#).*

One of the downsides of being a remote team is that physical interaction doesn't happen unless you make a dedicated effort to get the team together.

While we are firmly of the belief that day-to-day work does not need to happen in person, we do believe that there are some things that happen easier when in person. Because of that we try to get the whole team together for a company retreat twice a year.

We've now run five company retreats. Here's everything we've learned to pull them off.

## 1. Why should you do it?



Big, full-company retreats can be tough to coordinate and can cost quite a bit of money, so why even bother?

Ultimately, because some things are just better done in person. For instance, it's hard to have a casual conversation with a teammate over Google Hangout about their kids, shoot the breeze about some random idea you've had improving a secondary process in the company or sit down and talk about company values. All those things tend to naturally happen in person, while they don't happen in a remote team, unless you force it.

Also, it's a ton of fun. Since you don't see everyone on a daily basis, it's a ton of fun to actually have everyone around for a week-long excursion where you can chat shop and learn more about each other as people rather than the person on the other end of that avatar you see ever day.

## 2. Where should you do it?



Wherever you want!

We've had retreats in California, Washington, Colorado, Alabama and Utah.

That said there are a few things to consider:

1. Make it somewhere easy for folks to get (i.e. less than two hour drive from an airport).
2. Go somewhere that can hold everyone. We've done AirBnB and HomeAway houses. Hotels feel sterile, but houses feel inviting. Get a really big house that folks couldn't normally afford on their own.
3. Don't worry so much about being close to tons of activities. We used to think having a really active city nearby would be important, but then realized we rarely took advantage of the full city amenities.
4. That said, do have some activities very near the house. Beach-side houses or houses with big games rooms (pool, pingpong, etc) are great because people can entertain themselves in downtime without driving places.

Ultimately though, go with what suits your company. I know some companies travel overseas or some bring everyone into headquarters.

### 3. How long you should do it?



It depends. You need to be respectful of people's time. After some iteration we've found five full days bookend by two travel days to be a good fit. People with family and kids aren't too inconvenienced and it's long enough to do something meaningful.

As you grow another thing to consider is staggering travel days. We have the founding team plus international travelers come in a day early and leave a day later. This means customer support for Zapier isn't abysmal for one day while everyone is traveling, since we're there a bit early we can prepare the location with food and since we're there a day after we can make sure to clean up.

## 4. What should you do?



It can be easy to default to doing the things you always do on a day-to-day basis at work. But that would be a waste of an opportunity.

We decided early on that we should do things during the week that we can't do together—even if it was at the expense of making progress on Zapier itself. After all, we work on the product every other day of the year. For one week it makes sense to take some time off and work on the team which is just as important as the product itself.

Some of the best activities we do are mostly unrelated to work.

1. We randomly paired people up each night of the week to prepare dinner for the others. There's something special about cooking a meal for your teammates that helps you learn a lot about one another. This has been a staple at Zapier retreats.
2. We play [Mafia](#) which is a great party game.
3. We've hiked Mt. Rainer, skied, swam in the ocean, and visited the USS Alabama together. Doing something physical is also a great way to learn more about each other.

We also spend time doing work-related things as well. The best format we've found is to pair a mini-conference with a hackathon. Here's how it works.

1. You'll have 4 work days. Split these days into themes (i.e. support, marketing, product, team).
2. Each morning have a few members of the team give 15 minute talks on something related to that area of the company. A good format is: here's what things used to be, here's where we're at now, here's what we're shooting for.
3. Do Q/A after the talks.
4. In the afternoon split into cross-functional groups and build something small (a prototype, an internal tool or maybe a real feature) that helps the team in some small way that's related to the theme day.
5. Re-group around 5pm and do demos about what was built.

After doing a couple retreats, the best retreats combine something everyone on the team can work on in person along with multiple activities that help the team get to know each other better.

## 5. What about the cost?



Obviously cost is a big consideration for doing a trip like this. We have the luxury of generating significant revenue each month so it makes it easy to splurge a little (we paid for the whole trip including plane tickets for all our teammates).

Also, a typical remote team saves tons of money each month by not having to pay for an office or paying for a much smaller one than you'd normally have to have. We decided to pour the money we save on office-related expenses into the trip.

The total cost of the trip wasn't cheap, but what's even more expensive is having a remote team that doesn't work well together. Ultimately, the cost of the trip is well worth it in my mind, but you have to make that choice based on the constraints of your own business.

## Getting Feedback on the Trip



If you're planning to keep doing retreats as you grow then you'll want to make sure the retreats keep getting better. The way to do this is to ask for feedback.

For example, the feedback we got from our first company retreat was that since we paired the trip with a conference, everyone spent a ton of time doing their own thing at the conference and by the time we all were able re-group at the place in the evening everyone was really tired. So we decided not to do retreats alongside conferences again.

Here's some questions that are useful to ask the team after a retreat:

1. What was awesome about the trip? Be as detailed as you'd like.
2. What should we do differently the next time around? Be as detailed as you'd like.
3. In retrospect, are you glad we focussed on the projects we did or do you think a different project (or the same project structured differently) would have been better and why?
4. How do you feel about the length of the trip?

5. What dates are you NOT available between January and March?
6. Any preferred locations for next time around?

## Conclusion



Doing a company wide retreat is a big event, but it's a lot of fun. If you run a remote team, I would highly encourage you to consider planning one for the next year. I think you'll find it well worth it and your teammates will love your company even more for it.

---

*Written by Wade Foster.*

# Working in a Remote Team

*Including:*

- This is What a Remote Office Looks Like
- How to Work Faster in a Remote Team
- How to Find Your Optimal Work Environment and Boost Productivity
- How to Work in Different Timezones
- How to Avoid Burnout in a Remote Team
- A Special Thanks To Those Who Share: The Best Blog Posts, Articles and Resources on Remote Work

## Chapter 9: This is What a Remote Office Looks Like



One of the rarely talked about benefits of working in a remote team is that you have complete control over your workspace. In a traditional environment, you're forced to work in a one-size-fits-all environment which is often sub-optimal for everyone.

At Zapier, everyone creates their own workspace and today we thought it would be fun to share. Here are the workspaces of some of the Zapier teammates.

## Alison Groves, Customer Champion - Nashville, Tenn.



**Setup:** I'm a MacBook Pro 27-inch Cinema Display gal. I like having a lot of screen space so I can reference things and respond to users at the same time.

**Workspace Temperature:** In winter, the heat is set to 65 degrees with a space heater underneath my desk. In the summer, the air is set to 78 degrees with a fan on in my office. My dad raised us to be *very* frugal with energy, so I have my Nest thermometer on a very strict schedule.

**Music:** I'm a huge Sigur Ros fan, so anything in the Icelandic ambient category is my jam. I'm so ADD that I can't ever really listen to lyrics and read/write at the same time, so I stick to a band that doesn't sing in English.

I blast the music, so I can at least be aware of my surroundings

when I'm home alone.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I can kind of play drums, so I find myself playing kick drum with me feet all the time, which I know would drive people crazy. I also get up and down a lot, which drives me crazy.

## Brian Cooksey, Platform Engineer - Columbia, Mo.



**Setup:** Beefy laptop that can run Linux VMs. Dual monitor of some form (currently sporting a 27-inch as primary with laptop secondary). I like to play music through speakers as opposed to headphones.

Clean desk and a glass of water.

**Workspace Temperature:** Cooler, otherwise my hands tend to sweat

**Music:** I'm about 50/50 music versus silence. When I do play tunes, I cycle between Electronic and Rock, with the occasional Jazz fling.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I bounce my leg...a lot. I also like to sing aloud to my music, so it's for the best that we are remote.

## **Bryan Helmig, Backend Engineer - Sunnyvale, Calif.**



**Setup:** Simple is usually better, the big monitor is nice but sometimes I forgo that and just use my MBP on a kitchen table. Always got to have a good pair of headphones (noise canceling is a big plus!).

**Workspace Temperature:** In the winter, I usually like it warmer (say 74 degrees). In the summer, cooler is better (say 70 degrees).

**Music:** I get around: blues by the three Kings, any Blue Note or Capital jazz, soulfully sampled hip hop, various pop hits or albums, some new (and classic) bluegrass, various neo or pop country cuts,

etc.

## Christopher Peters, Data Scientist - Miami, Florida



**Setup:** MacBook Air, a Geek Desk stand-up desk, noise-canceling headphones, and an internet connection. Most of my work is done on Amazon EC2 instances, so truly the “cloud” is probably my most invaluable tool. I’m a huge fan of Amazon’s Redshift analytics database.

**Workspace Temperature:** 70 degrees (F), generally. Although, I have two windows next to my workspace that sometimes I open in order to enjoy a nice and warm breeze. Sometimes I just get tired of the air conditioning.

**Music:** I’m a huge fan of ambient music. I find that intense music will sap my energy, so I like to keep it chill and ambient. Sometimes I get an itch for various forms of hip hop, but usually when I need to work on a task that doesn’t require my full focus.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I’m super sensitive to sound and interruption, so I’m almost militant about blocking out outside noise and distractions.

## Craig Labenz, Full Stack Engineer - Nomad.



## Danny Schreiber, Marketing Lead - Omaha, Neb.



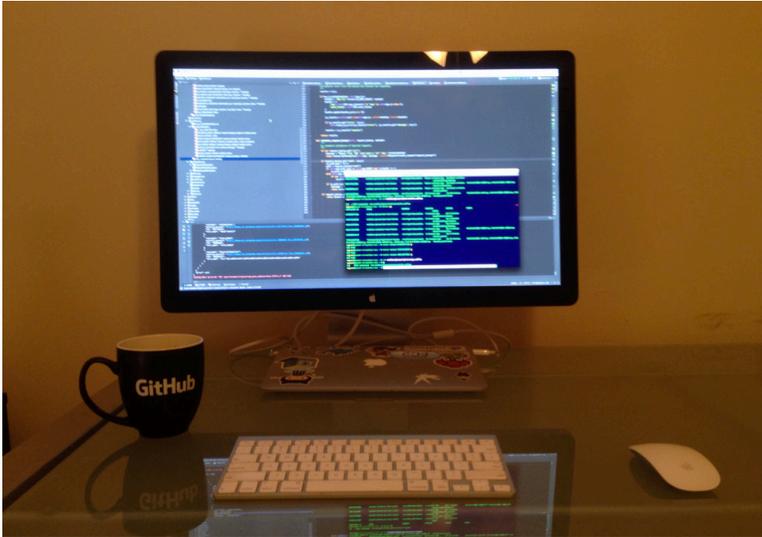
**Setup:** Working in a shared office space where I'm among others doing creative work. I also prefer to have my laptop propped up on a desk with a stand, bringing my screen to eye level.

**Workspace Temperature:** 73 degrees

**Music:** Pandora, mainly Vampire Weekend Radio, The Xx Radio or Local Native Radio

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I have a bad habit of cracking my knuckles and neck, which even annoys me sometimes.

## James Carr, Systems Engineer - Columbia, Mo.



**Setup:** Clear workspace, different location to get different perspective on a problem, unix-based workstation (currently OS X on MacBook Air though!)

**Workspace Temperature:** 72 degrees

**Music:** Tool, Led Zeppelin, Nine Inch Nails, Oasis, The Who, 311

## **Jess Byrne, Customer Champion - Kunkletown, Penn.**



**Setup:** All I need is my MacBook Pro and something to write on

**Workspace Temperature:** 65-70 degrees

**Music:** Pandora - Childish Gambino Radio. Headphones on, though sometimes I'll play it out loud.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I play hockey and occasionally like to stickhandle a ball with my hockey stick.

## Joe Stych, Content Marketer - Portland, Me.



## Justin Deal, Full Stack Engineer - Manchester, Mo.



**Setup:** MacBook Pro with a giant monitor. But that clashes with my desire to move around a lot. So, my preferred setup would be some kind of large monitor that follows me around or maybe some contact lenses of the future so I don't need a physical display anymore, and I can use my whole visual field.

**Workspace Temperature:** 73 or 74 degrees are both perfect

**Music:** I generally prefer to work in silence, but I can work with non-distracting background noise. I don't really like boring music, and music that isn't boring distracts me too much.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I don't think so, but I am often driven crazy by other people's quirks. I tend not to say anything for a long time and then blurt out something nasty at some point. Which, I guess is a kind of a quirk.

## Lindsay Brand, Customer Champion - Barcelona, Spain.



**Setup:** MacBook Pro with 27-inch Cinema Display! Also I love a mouse, I've never been a trackpad person, if I take my laptop out, my mouse will come with me.

**Workspace Temperature:** I like it warm, I struggle to type with cold fingers.

**Music:** Anything goes with me! Sometimes some Jazz, electronic, heavy metal, late 80s/early 90s hiphop, sometimes I'll brave the Spotify top 100 pop playlist.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I type really really loudly. I hammer the keys with some serious purpose. It generally drives people bonkers but I like it, it feels more productive than it probably is.

## Matthew Guay, Marketing - Bangkok, Thailand



**Setup:** 13" Retina MacBook Pro, and a 25" LG Ultrawide monitor—great for keeping a ton of stuff open side-by-side. Though half the time I work straight from the MacBook from my cozy dining room table or a makeshift standing desk hack.

**Workspace Temperature:** 25°C (77°F) if I'm in the office, and whatever the ambient temp is if I'm in the dining room with the windows open. So at least half of the time it's just whatever the shade temp in Bangkok is—with a fan. And I happen to like that.

**Music:** Jazz, soundtracks, or ambient music if writing; whatever happen to like right then otherwise. I'll listen to the same song on repeat for forever until I'm so bored of it I never want to hear it again. Rinse, repeat.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** Drumming on the table when I'm trying to think. Also working while everyone else is sleeping. That'd have to drive them crazy.

## Micah Bennett, Customer Champion - Palatine, Ill.



**Setup:** To really be able to get stuff done, the biggest thing for me is cutting down on distractions. So in my office there's no pictures or other visual cues cluttering my workspace if I can help it, and it's a separate room so I can make sure things are quiet.

**Workspace Temperature:** I'm not super picky, but I guess I'd rather lean towards a cooler area. I can always add more layers/blankets, but sweating through the day eats up willpower.

**Music:** I go back and forth with music, but mostly it's no music, instrumental, or music I'm very familiar with so it doesn't distract.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I'm a bit squirmy by nature, so if I was right next to my teammates or across a table from them all day they might get a bit irritated/distracted by my constant movement in my chair.

## Mike Knoop, Product and Partner Lead - Sunnyvale, Calif.



**Setup:** I use a 15-inch 2012 MacBook Pro laptop as my daily driver. The machine's screen size is large enough that I can be highly efficient when not "plugged in" and it's powerful enough to display the laptop screen simultaneously alongside two 30-inch external displays at my desk. I also mount one of the 30-inch external displays vertically for long-form editing and coding.

**Workspace Temperature:** 68 or 69 degrees with a light hoodie on. This is surprisingly hard to achieve because those 30-inch displays put out a lot of heat.

**Music:** I'm a fan of EDM (electronic dance music) and follow a few artists on SoundCloud. Some of these guys make hour-long tracks! The music style is consistent enough that it easily drowns out background noise and I never have to worry about changing

the track.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I tend to be a night owl, which can be frustrating for folks who want to get ahold of me in the morning, especially those in different timezones! I aim to keep 4-6 hours of overlap with everyone on the team to mitigate this.

## **Rob Golding, Full Stack Engineer - Nottingham, UK.**



## Wade Foster, CEO - Sunnyvale, Calif.



**Setup:** I love to move around when working. I get bored when working in the same spot day after day and even hour after hour. So I'll start my day on the couch, move to the kitchen table, go next door to my office desk, work from the office kitchen table to keep things mixed up.

**Workspace Temperature:** I want to be comfortable in shorts and a T-shirt. For me, that's right around 75 degrees.

**Music:** I don't listen to music as often as I used to. I like it with peace and quiet.

**Office Quirks That Might Drive Teammates Bonkers:** I love to pace. Whenever I'm on a call I'll walk around the entire room. It gives me energy on the call. But it definitely can distract other people who are trying to work.

## **Additional Thoughts**

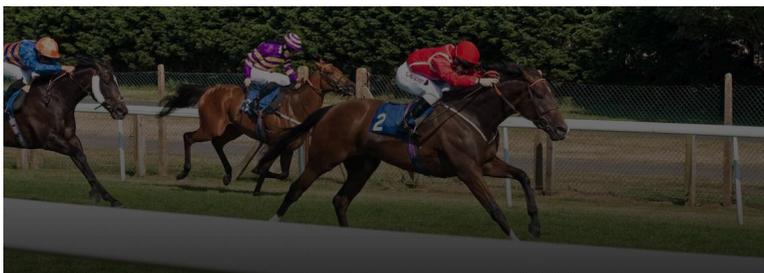
Fascinating to me is that all of us work great together. But if forced to be in an office with one other for 250 days a year, we might not like working with each other quite as much.

Working distributed thus helps everyone optimize their environment in a way that suites them best while not distracting others on the team.

---

*Written by Wade Foster*

# Chapter 10: How to Work Faster in a Remote Team



*This chapter was contributed by Zapier content marketer Danny Schreiber.*

“OK, I’m done.”

I vividly remember reading that short, punchy sentence again and again in my first few weeks at Zapier, each time pursing my lips, scrunching my forehead and thinking, “How did Wade finish that task so fast? Geesh, I’m slow.”

Zapier is my first job on a remote team. Prior to my time here, I spent two years in a co-located corporate cube farm and four years in a regional media company. Never though had I been a part of an organization in which each team member is on their own, dictating their own hours, office setup and work environment.

For my boss—Zapier co-founder [Wade Foster](#)—and the half-dozen other individuals on the team when I joined, this freedom gave rise to a higher level of productivity, too. Or so they felt.

“Non-remote work defaults to the highest distraction communication first, which is in-person. Remote work defaults to the lowest,

which is no communication,” said Zapier co-founder [Mike Knoop](#) when I asked him if he felt he worked faster in a remote team.

“Less distractions lead to faster work,” Mike added. “You have to purposely decide to enter into more distracting conversations.”

For Wade, it’s been a similar experience.

“Less distractions,” he said when asked the same question. “I don’t get sucked into side conversations. No one plays crappy music really loud. I don’t get hit in the head with a Nerf ball.”

“Things are more to the point,” he added.

Of course, those are Zapier co-founders speaking; they are, without a doubt, biased on this topic. So what about my teammates at Zapier or members of other remote organizations: Do they find the distributed team structure increases productivity? And if so, why? I went searching for input.

## Are You More Productive?

*Have you found working on a remote team has resulted in you working faster, more productively? If yes, how? If no, why do you think not?*

That’s the question I sent out to a dozen colleagues in the remote working world. Tabulating the nine replies that came back, six individuals said “yes,” two said “yes and no,” and one replied he “wouldn’t say that working with a remote team has really affected the pace of my work.” And though these nine answers vary, there is a constant theme: a remote working environment *allows* for a faster pace of work. Whether or not that’s the intention of the remote employer, it’s the common outcome.

[Belle Beth Cooper](#)—formerly a content crafter at [Buffer](#) and now a she freelancer for companies (including Zapier) from her apartment in Melbourne—summed it up best in her response.

“Working remotely has definitely led me to find ways to work faster,” Cooper says. “It didn’t happen naturally as a result of remote work, but the freedom of remote work means I can experiment with different work spaces, different work times and approaches, and find what works best for me as well as what helps me work fastest.”

“It didn’t happen naturally as a result of remote work, but the freedom of remote work means I can experiment ... and find what works best.” - Belle Beth Cooper

Complementing Cooper’s take is [Zach Leatherman](#), an Omaha-based web developer part of the remote [Filament Group](#) team, who points out that it’s a two-sided equation.

“In my opinion, remote work can only succeed in environments that have little red tape and low barrier to decision making,” he says. “If employees don’t have freedom and independence to make decisions, remote work will be less effective.”

So when both parties are present—the freedom-giving remote employer and the productivity-seeking remote employee—work happens at a faster pace. Could it be that simple? The trait “[propensity towards action](#)” is, after all, one that we look for in candidates when we’re hiring.

We could boil it down to that, but it would leave out some of the unique characteristics that define remote work. Knoop’s comment, for example, is that remote work inherently cuts down on distracting conversations because a majority of the communication is written rather than verbal. So whether or not the individual has an aim to increase their productivity, when they’re in the remote environment Knoop describes they’ll be more productive.

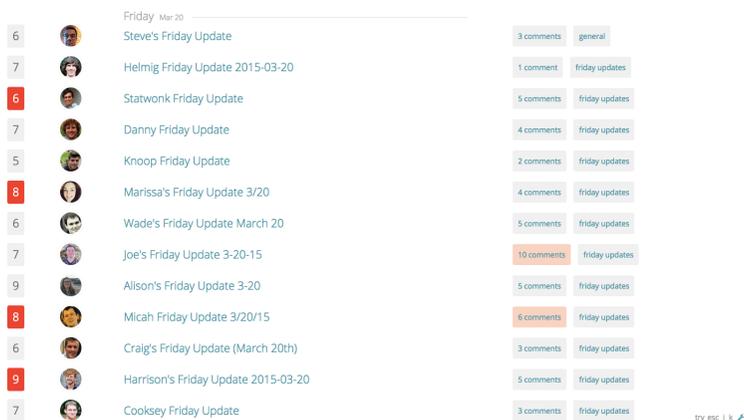
Putting that to the test, I asked my 21 teammates and the group of nine colleagues for examples of how being part of a remote team has helped them work faster. Here are eight of the ways they offered followed by a few ways in which they work slower, too.

---

## **How to Work Faster Like a Remote Team**

1. Pull Internal Communication Out of Your Inbox
  2. Rely on the Right Tools
  3. Use Differing Schedules to Your Advantage
  4. Skip the Commute
  5. Cancel Meetings
  6. Think Before You Send
  7. Set Up Your Best Environment
  8. Own Up to Your Productivity
-

# 1. Pull Internal Communication Out of Your Inbox



Each Friday, Zapier team members recap their week with a post on the company's internal blog.

Think about the number of words you speak each day—3 minutes of conversation with your favorite barista, 15 minutes on a conference call with a new client, 30 minutes unpacking your day with a friend or your spouse over dinner. Now imagine typing all of those conversations out in email form. That's the majority of remote communication.

By default, these conversations and others like it fall into your inbox and pile up, waiting for you to read and reply. And that's exactly what you do—a [survey](#) conducted by McKinsey Global Institute in 2012, for example, found that 28% of a professional's work week is dedicated to reading and answering email. That's the highest time allotment outside role specific tasks, which clocks in at 39%.

To thwart this imminent mess of mail as the Zapier team grew from 8 to 19 last year, we began taking inventory of which conversations belonged in our inboxes and which ones belonged elsewhere for

the sake of context and convenience. The result: only two internal emails remained. (The emails: team feedback following an applicant's team interview and announcements of new hires.)

Company and department updates, project specs, design mock-ups and individual "Friday Update" reports moved from email to our [private internal blog](#), and the aggravating "Reply All" emails that accompanied them became easy-to-read threaded comments. Team and department feedback, along with questions and discussions, moved to team collaboration and chat app [Slack](#), which replaced one-on-one email threads with its private messaging feature, too. And Slack, even, became the place we find out about new public and private blog posts with a [Zapier integration](#).

It's tough to put a total "time-saved" figure on the email changes inside our team, but that's OK because it's not the only—or even the best—result. What's best is the order it brings—assurance that when there's a new email, it's meaningful, and when there are five replies to a department update on our internal blog, they're quick to read (and "like", too).

Or as [Andreas Klinger](#), a remote team member of [Product Hunt](#), puts it: "Communication feels cheap to do but often adds up to a lot of time costs and very often only results in more communication (unless framed in processes)." Streamlining communications and cutting down on the back-and-forth emails is the true benefit of pulling communications out of your inbox.

"Communication feels cheap to do but often adds up to a lot of time costs." - Andreas Klinger, Product Hunt

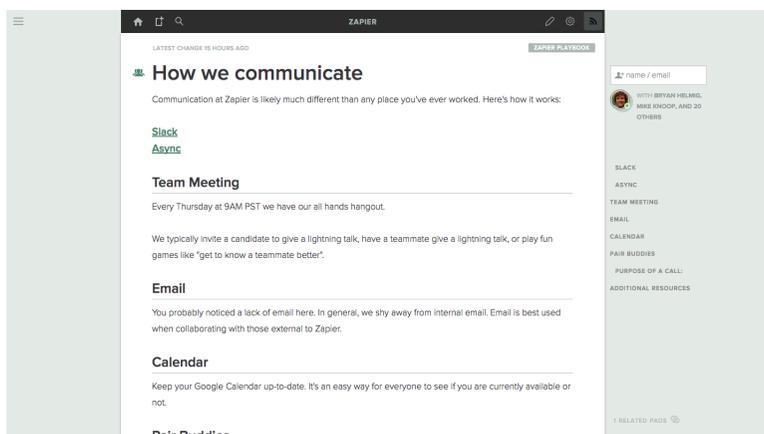
That said, your team might not need to pull internal communication out of your inbox to find benefits. The team behind payments company Stripe, which like Product Hunt has some team members in an office and others remote, kept their email intact but [added structure](#) such as [advanced Gmail filters](#). The remote Popforms

team of just three also [finds their inbox](#) to be the most effective place for communication.

“We probably over-communicate by email,” writes Popforms co-founder [Kate Stull](#). “If we make a change in our product management tool marking something as done, we’ll also let the affected people know by email too. We don’t want anything to fall through the cracks, and it is by being absolutely sure we are all on the same page that we can trust that we’re all still going in the right direction.”

Slack works for our team—it keeps us out of the inbox, and frees up our time to work on more important projects. But what matters is finding an efficient communication model for you and your team.

## 2. Rely on the Right Tools



The Zapier team turns to Hackpad anytime it needs to document a process.

We love apps at Zapier. We’re constantly playing around with them, [integrating them into our own platform](#), and trying them out in our workflows.

So as we moved email threads out of our inboxes, we needed to find

an app for each convo. Slack absorbed most of the load, but not all. Progress updates around our editorial calendar moved into [Trello](#), a highly customizable project management tool. Step-by-step guides teaching fellow co-workers, for example, how to instigate a [drip campaign](#), moved into [Hackpad](#), a collaborative documentation tool. And before we relied on our private internal blog for weekly updates, we used [iDoneThis](#), an app that makes it easy to record the tasks you accomplished.

When your remote team lands on the right tools, you can really get in the groove. That was an experience shared by [Matthew Makai](#), a remote employee on Twilio's team, another company that's split between colocated and distributed employees.

"My colleague Ricky Robinett and I wrote [this blog post](#) on our new TaskRouter API together while he was in NYC and I was in D.C.," Makai says, noting several other colleagues gave their input on the piece, too.

"I felt like we were more efficient than if we were in-person because we had a mastery over our communication tools, including Google Docs, Trello, Flowdock and video chat. If we were in the same room I don't believe it would've worked as well because the writing-review-revision feedback loop is inherently asynchronous so we all worked on our own schedules."

"We were more efficient than if we were in-person because we had a mastery over our communication tools." - Matthew Makai, Twilio

[Scott Hanselman](#), a Microsoft employee who works remotely from Portland, best sums up the remote worker's approach to [trying and using tools](#) when you need something outside your essential toolkit.

"We use Lync at work, but I also use Skype, GChat, Join.me, straight VNC, Windows Remote Assistance, CoPilot and a dozen others," he

says. “If one doesn’t work for some reason, don’t waste time, just move to the next one.”

Once again, the time savings of being remote might come directly from being remote, but because you’re forced to try new tools that work great remotely *and* can also speed you up.

**See Tools of Remote Teams:** Google “[remote team tools](#)” and you’ll discover what’s working best for the teams at [Ghost](#), [Buffer](#), [Hanno](#), [Groove](#) and others.

### 3. Use Differing Schedules to Your Advantage

Makai, in the quote above, found that the flexible schedule that comes with a remote team speeds up his writing and editing process. And he’s not the only one: among the individuals polled for this piece, the most popular answer for how remote work enables individuals to work faster is the ability to decide one’s hours.

“For the most part, I’m free to structure my day as I like, and I think that allows me to maximize my most productive times of the day and also maximize the times when I need a break,” says [Emma Wilhelm](#), a remote member of the [Mad Mimi](#) team.

IDoneThis founder [Walter Chen](#) uses his adjustable schedule to get over his “2 p.m. post-lunch lull.”

“When I was a lawyer, I had to close the door of my office and put my head down on the desk for a quick nap. Still, you can imagine that the head-down on the desk nap isn’t as refreshing as it could be,” he says. “Now that I work remotely, I’m able to lie down for a nap or go to the gym for a quick workout, which gives me a huge energy boost.”

“I’m free to structure my day as I like, and I think that allows me to maximize my most productive times of the day (get tons done)” - Emma Wilhelm, Mad Mimi

[Joe Stych](#), a Portland, Maine-based team member at Zapier, has a different take on the schedule offered by remote companies, one that means maximizing his allotted time.

“At my old job, productivity was zero after 4 p.m.—I was counting down the minutes until I got in my car, or just refreshing my email to make sure my boss didn’t send me something,” Stych says. At Zapier, he’s nestled in his home office, working until he signs off Slack.

For some teams though, making the most of the schedule doesn’t mean working when most productive, but always staying productive because you can work around the clock.

“We’re spread over a number of different time zones all over the world, so our development is 24/7,” says Groove founder and CEO [Alex Turnbull](#). “Even when those of us in the U.S. are sleeping, our developers in Europe and South Africa are hustling. Customers can get help at any hour, and production never stops.”

Inside Zapier, we take advantage of this benefit, too. My marketing teammate [Matthew Guay](#), for example, is based in Thailand, so our clocks are opposite—when it’s 8 a.m. in Omaha, it’s 8 p.m. in Bangkok. At the end of the workday, I’ll often hand off a piece to Matthew for editing. When I wake up the next morning, it’s all marked up. Never in my six years on an editorial team have I had the quick workflow offered by this unique situation.

## 4. Skip the Commute

“We save, collectively, dozens of hours each week on commuting,” says Groove’s Turnbull. “Those hours go into getting things done,

and over time, that amounts to massive, massive wins.”

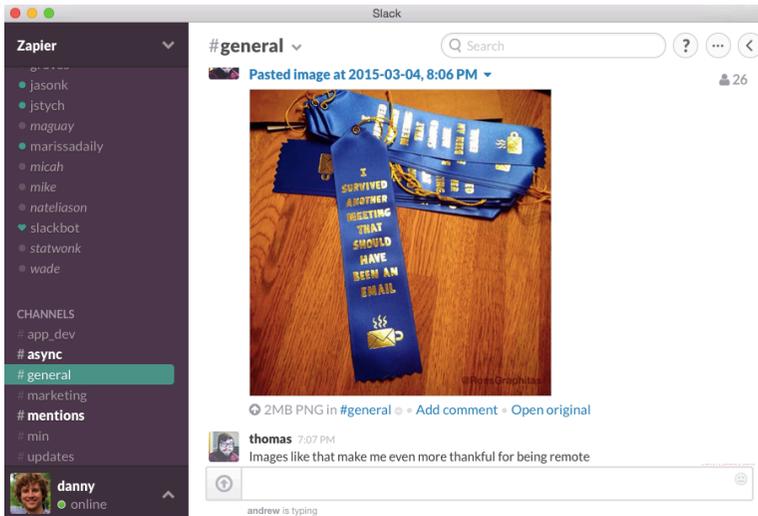
Zapier co-founder and CEO Wade Foster has a similar take. “I jump right into work when I’m ready. And leave when I’m done. There’s zero friction between working and not.”

“We save, collectively, dozens of hours each week on commuting.” - Alex Turnbull, Groove

While this is perhaps the most-heralded aspect of remote working, it might be one that’s underutilized, as well. In essence, the commute, be it 15 minutes or 50 minutes, is found as an excess when you’re remote working. Why spend time in the car when you can get right down to it at your home office?

Applying that same principle to other activities yields a productivity boost, as well. Instead of leaving your office to grab lunch, for example, get it the day before or prepare it that morning. Rather than go for coffee in the afternoon, rely on a thermos or switch to tea, which makes preparation easy. Look to cut excess from your team’s processes, too. Instead of holding that weekly stats recap meeting, for example, spin up an internal blog post that details the numbers.

## 5. Cancel Meetings



“Hey, can you hear me?” ... “How about now?”

You’d never say that when you’ve stepped aside for an impromptu meeting, but it’s a common occurrence when starting up a video conference call. This annoyance is surprisingly helpful though: you purposely try to avoid putting yourself in that scenario. Yes, as if [meetings weren’t bad enough](#), now you have to put up with fussy software that multiplies meeting pain.

So the best thing to do is ask yourself: do we really need that meeting?

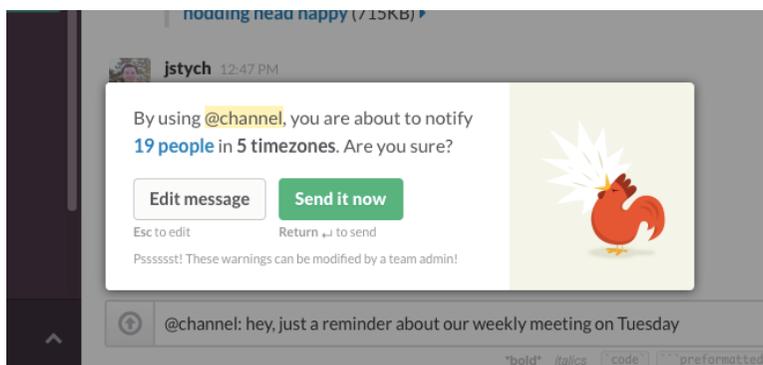
Start asking yourself that question and you’ll start earning back dozens of hours monthly. (That’s a potential [7,000 hours back](#) for the unnamed organization in a report by [Bain & Company](#).)

The team at iDoneThis reconfigured their weekly meeting after giving it a second thought. They knew they wanted to hold a regular meeting for some important face-to-face contact, but the content of

meeting was ineffective.

“Since we didn’t set forth a specific enough protocol or purpose, the Hangouts were unfocused, devolved into rambling discussions about product, and ended up wasting our time,” writes former iDoneThis team member [Janet Choi](#). After consideration, they changed up the format to a more effective weekly show-and-tell session.

## 6. Think Before You Send



With a majority of communication on a remote team being in the written form, you start to notice something about how you talk with your teammates: you put more thought into it. It’s hard to just spout something out; you first must type it out, read what you’ve written and then hit “send” or “publish.” Those extra little step add a helpful filter to your conversations: you end up thinking before you speak, yielding more clear and concise communication. It’s probably no surprise then that “proficient written communicator” is among the [skills we look for when hiring](#) at Zapier.

This is a tactic that can work for in-person teams, too. Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, for example, bans [Powerpoint presentations](#) in meetings.

Instead, he requires each attendee to come prepared with a memo, which is then read by the others before the meeting starts.

“Full sentences are harder to write,” Bezos [says in a Fortune article](#). “They have verbs. The paragraphs have topic sentences. There is no way to write a six-page, narratively structured memo and not have clear thinking.”

If your company relies on a [team chat application](#) like Slack, [HipChat](#) or [Campfire](#), you’ll see this benefit, too.

“Things are more to the point,” says Zapier’s Foster. “In-person meetings tend to have lots of chit-chat, *how’s the weather* talk. In chat you skip over most of that and get right to the point.”

## 7. Set Up Your Best Environment



The home offices of the Zapier team vary dramatically

“If you ask people the question, ‘Where do you really need to go when you need to get something done?’ you typically get three different kinds of answers,” says [Jason Fried](#), the founder of Basecamp and co-author of bestselling book *Remote: No Office Required*. One answer is a place, location or room, such as the porch or the coffee shop; another is a moving object, such as a plane or train; and another is a time, really early in the morning or on the weekends.

“You almost never hear someone say ‘the office,’ but businesses are spending all this money on this place called the office and they’re making people go to it all the time. Yet people don’t do work in the office.”

“It’s like the front door of the office is like a Cuisinart and you walk in and your day is shredded to bits.” - Jason Fried, Basecamp

Fried, who [delivered these words on stage](#) at TEDxMidwest 2010, says he’s been asking people this productivity question for about 10 years.

The office, he says, is where “work moments” happen, not work days. “It’s like the front door of the office is like a Cuisinart and you walk in and your day is shredded to bits because you have 15 minutes here, and 30 minutes there and then something else happens and you’re pulled off your work ... and then it’s lunch.”

Take those distractions away, and you can be a lot more productive. “People need to be able to be away from the distractions of the workplace to actually work and get things done,” says [Melanie Pinola](#), a regular freelance contributor to Lifehacker who pointed me to Fried’s talk. “When I first started telecommuting, I found myself finishing my tasks much earlier than I had previously, and ended up taking on more responsibilities...from home, because I just worked better in this environment.”

Aside from the ability to dictate their schedule, those who I spoke with that found remote work increased their productivity pointed to the ability to control their environment as a main factor.

“Having a quiet day at home to write means I get work done way faster,” says [Jimmy Daly](#), a Tucson, Ariz.-based member of the remote [Vero](#) team.

[Andy Orin](#), a blogger on the remote Lifehacker team, is hesitant to say that remote work has made an impact on his pace, though he sees upside in the ability to quickly alter external distractions. “If there is an advantage, it’s probably the ease with which I can take time to focus on something without distractions from my coworkers,” he says. “Just need to change my IM status to ‘away’ and minimize Slack.”

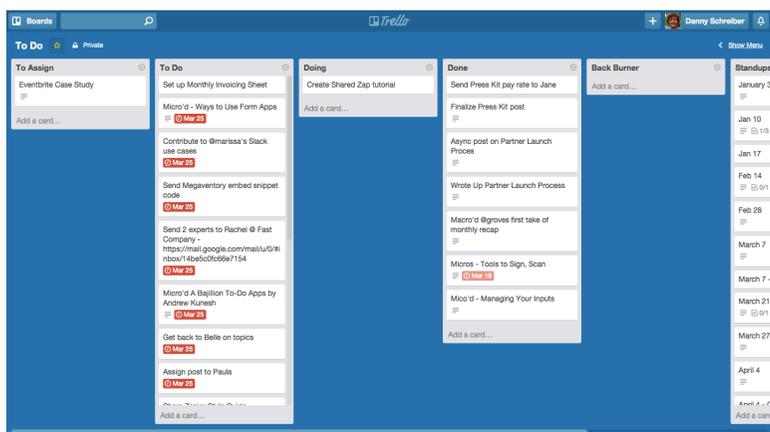
Working from home allows you to quickly change your surroundings, too.

That’s an upside Zapier’s Guay has found. “Stand while you work, or sit. Kneel at a table if that feels right for a bit. Sit back on the couch to edit, or walk around the house with a draft to read over. Use speakers for music if you want...or have perfect silence.”

Remote work also doesn’t need to be restricted to your own abode—go wherever makes you productive.

“Often just being at home can drive you nuts,” writes Microsoft’s [Hanselman](#). “I try to get out a few times a week. I’ve worked from the mall, from Starbucks, from McDonald’s (free wi-fi, sue me) and from a park bench. I find that just having people walking around makes me feel more productive.”

## 8. Own Up to Your Productivity



Whether it’s working in your own home or a nearby coffee shop, there’s another aspect that pushes remote employees to work faster: you’re responsible for your productivity. Gone are the regular

meetings and brainstorming sessions in “Conference Room 3B,” and no more can you pull up a spreadsheet and stare at your screen to appear engulfed in busy work. You now must own up to what you did and didn’t accomplish.

That’s what motivated Cooper cut down the time it took her to write a blog post [from two days to four hours](#). She saw Buffer co-founder [Leo Widrich](#) churning out posts at a much faster pace than her, so she examined what could be holding her up. Between cutting out excess research and distractions like email, Cooper eventually narrowed in on how to author a quality blog post in the least amount of time necessary—just one morning.

“Now that I’ve proven to myself over and over that I can write a post in a morning without dropping my quality, they’re a lot less formidable in my mind,” writes Cooper. “I think that makes a huge difference to how I work.”

Personally, I’ve recently found keeping tally of my to-dos on a Trello board helps me stay focused on what’s most important that day. It also saves time at week’s end, too, since I use a Zapier integration to [copy all the cards in the “done” Trello column to a Hackpad pad](#), which I pull out each week. The average time it takes me to write my weekly recap for our internal blog instantly went from around 40 to 20 minutes.

It’s a stretch to say all remote workers are inclined to be more productive, but the topic itself has become a theme on blogs of remote teams. Buffer’s Widrich, for example, [regularly writes](#) about it. Hanselman offers a [long list of productivity tips](#), so too [does Rob Rawson](#), CEO of the remote Staff.com team.

## Not So Fast... What Doesn't Work About Remote Work

As a remote worker myself, I'll admit to being biased in this piece and giving the most attention to the upside of the working arrangements. But there are downsides, too.

"There are times of course where working together would be faster," says Daly of Vero. "For example, when we redesigned our site, the process was slowed down by waiting for responses from people who were fast asleep in another timezone."

"It's harder to communicate via typical in-person channels such as whiteboards." - Matthew Makai, Twilio

Twilio's Makai finds difficulty in being the lone remote team member when an in-person meeting is happening at the headquarters.

"The downside is when I'm working with a group of folks at HQ in San Francisco and I'm in D.C., it's harder to communicate via typical in-person channels such as whiteboards," he says, noting he circumvents this issue by visiting the office at least quarterly for in-person meetings.

I'll add one more to the list: shoddy internet. My home wifi has given me more trouble than I ever remember experiencing in when I worked in an office building. And when the internet's out, well, productivity takes a hit (and your mobile hotspot comes to the rescue).

## The Right Reason to Go Remote?

Whether you're a founder considering going remote or a professional contemplating joining a remote team, a major benefit to

consider is the opportunity to amp your productivity. Between my own experience and conversations with over a dozen individuals for this post, it's clear that a remote workplace allows you to do just that. Whether or not you succeed at it is entirely up to you.

That said, to achieve this productivity boost, you might not need to go remote at all.

Thanks to the rise of [instant messaging apps](#) like Slack, [collaborative editing tools](#) like Google Docs and file sharing tools like Dropbox, there's a shift in the way we all communicate at work.

“Pay attention to how much time you actually spend each day in the same room talking in real time to other people—it's far less today than ever in history (I don't have data for this, but I've rarely heard counterarguments),” [writes Scott Berkun](#), author of *The Year Without Pants*, a book about remote work.

“Even in companies that do not allow ‘remote work,’ remote work is encouraged implicitly by the equipment used and the daily working habits we've adopted across our culture.”

## Unplug

“OK, I'm done,” I message Wade this time.

About six months into the job, I finally catch up to my new team's fast-paced environment. But it didn't come without pulling myself away from the team. My trick for writing faster, I found, is to completely unplug from the communication tools we use. Do this, and then put 100% focus on writing in a distraction-free environment. It works and I'm now working faster than ever before.

---

*Written by Zapier content marketer [Danny Schreiber](#).*

*Credits: Racing photo via [Andy Walker](#).*

# Chapter 11: How to Find Your Optimal Work Environment and Boost Productivity



*This chapter was contributed by Exist cofounder Belle Beth Cooper*

There's no shortage of productivity articles to read or techniques to try, but I've realized lately that optimal productivity comes in different states for everyone. Not only are some of us morning larks and others night owls, some of us need to move around a lot, others find a standing desk works best, and some of us work to music while others need silence.

The most important thing I've recently come to understand about productivity is that embracing what works for me (once I know what that is) is the best way to get more done. If you're struggling to improve your own workflows, here are three areas to start experimenting with.

## Time of Day



As more of us are working remotely, joining co-working spaces or working from home these days, we have more flexibility to work at the times when we're most productive. We can finally pay attention to what helps us do more, better work.

To start with, we all have a **built-in body clock** called a **circadian rhythm** that runs a little differently to everyone else's. This is what determines whether we're night owls or morning larks. Depending on how your internal body clock runs, you could be more suited to a particular part of the day. Generally speaking, we all start out being most suited to early mornings, and our body clocks slip later during adolescence, when we prefer to **sleep in and stay up late**. As we become adults, some of us hang on to these night owl tendencies, others become extreme morning larks, and most of us slide into a comfortable middle ground.

You probably already know what times of day suit you best, but if not, it's worth exploring since **being tired will hurt your**

**performance.** I had always liked being up early but I wasn't sure my body was naturally inclined that way until I tested starting my day later (which definitely isn't for me).

Although we all have different circadian rhythms, most of us have a **natural dip in energy** in the afternoon. So if you notice yourself moving slowly or feeling unmotivated after lunch, take heart in the fact that it's not just you.

Once you have a good idea of how your internal body clock works and how your energy naturally rises and falls throughout the day, you can use this information to plan a more productive workday. For instance, if you find working late at night suits you, plan your biggest tasks or your most intense projects for that period. If mornings work for you, you may need to get up earlier for some interruption-free focus time.

I often need a nap in the afternoon, so I've found that planning to work on major tasks before lunch and working from home where I can duck off for a half hour nap suits me best.

## Surroundings



Adjusting your surroundings to make you more productive is easy to underestimate, but can actually make a huge difference. For example, if your workspace is too cold, you're actually going to be *wasting energy trying to keep warm*. Of course being too warm is no good for your productivity either. You really need to find your "sweet spot" as far as temperature goes, and try to get your workplace as close to that as possible. The team at Zapier has [this figured out](#); everyone knows just what **temperature** they work best at, and takes control of keeping their workspace from getting too hot or cold.

If you're sharing a workspace you might need to bring in a portable fan or heater, or move your desk to be closer to the heating and cooling system (or further away).

**Noise levels** (and types) are another environmental factor that can affect productivity and are very personal. I always thought it was strange to like having TV reruns on in the background while I work

until I learned entrepreneur [Nate Kontny](#) does this, too. Nate built the first version of [Draft](#) while [watching The West Wing](#), because he found that worked well for him.

“I know this isn’t real common, but I’ve always been pretty good about working while watching television. It can’t be some really cerebral show that I’ve never seen before, but things like re-runs of [Felicity](#) or [West Wing](#) are perfect. The core of [Draft](#) was built while watching the entire season of [West Wing](#) over again at 1AM.” - [Nate Kontny on the Brightpod blog](#)

Aside from TV, others like [working with music on](#), though some need complete silence to concentrate. The type of work you’re doing can change what sounds make you most productive, too. [One study published by the Journal of Consumer Research](#) found that creative work is easier amongst ambient noise, which encourages us to think outside the box. If that’s you, check out an app called [Coffivity](#), which offers soundtracks such as “Morning Murmur” and “Lunchtime Lounge”. Silence is more suited to work that requires [deep focus](#) rather than creative thinking. And if you like working to music, your own preferences will obviously play a part in what you choose to listen to.

Lastly, pay attention to how much [light](#) your workspace has, and how it affects your productivity. I tend to need more natural light when I’m working than others, so I look for spaces to work near windows. On the other hand, a study published by the [Journal of Consumer Research](#) found that our creative thinking is [enhanced by dim lighting](#), which helps us to feel less inhibited. So test out your own preferences if you’re not sure about them, but keep in mind the type of work you’re doing when you adjust your workspace, as well.

## Managing Your Workload



Once your workspace is set up and you've worked out the time of day when you're most productive, you can start experimenting with how you approach work itself. Here are a few suggestions, but you'll definitely want to experiment to see what works for you.

### Chunk Your Tasks

If you have different types of work to get through, [grouping similar tasks together](#) into time “chunks” can make you more productive than switching between different types of work all day. For instance, small, simple tasks can be saved for the periods of your day when you're low in energy, or in-between meetings when you don't have time to get stuck into bigger projects.

A similar method is to [front-load your day](#) (or your week). This means you work on the big, intense projects first, and work on smaller tasks that don't have deadlines as you go through the day.

Knocking off your most important tasks first make it surprisingly more fun to finish other work in the afternoon, since the stress of today's deadlines is already dealt with.

## Just Get Started

Something I often struggle with is [just getting started](#) on a big task or project, so I take this into account when planning out my day. Breaking down a task into smaller sub-tasks or action steps can be helpful in getting over the hurdle of just starting.

Another way I've overcome this in the past is to just commit to working on something for just five minutes—not long enough for it to be a huge effort, but just long enough for me to feel like I might as well keep going, once the five minutes is up.

## Set Yourself a Challenge

When you're working from home or a remote workspace, it can sometimes be hard to keep up with your workload or meet all your deadlines. I've found a good way to manage this is to challenge myself. Sometimes I challenge myself to [get all my work done by noon](#). A short deadline can do wonders for your focus!

If you're a fan of the [Pomodoro Technique](#), you can use that as a challenge, too. Try challenging yourself to get something finished before your Pomodoro timer goes off—you might not get it done, but you'll probably find you focus a lot better when you're working against the clock in a short burst like that. If timers aren't your thing and you work from home, you can try "[real life Pomodoros](#)" instead: naturally occurring intervals that you can use as timers for short bursts of work, like waiting for your dishwasher to run through, or waiting for someone to arrive for a meeting.

---

In my own experience, testing one part of your workday at a time is the best way to know what makes a difference to your productivity (good and bad). Once you've got one thing in place, like what time of day you work best, you can experiment with another part, like how you chunk your tasks together or breaking down big projects to make them more manageable.

This probably all sounds like a lot of effort, but the pay off for knowing what makes *you* productive is huge. It's definitely a lot more rewarding than trying to use other people's methods and getting frustrated when they don't work.

*You might also enjoy this article on our blog: [“How to Scale Yourself and Get More Done Than You Thought Possible”](#).*

---

*Written by Exist cofounder [Belle Beth Cooper](#)*

*Credits: Header photo courtesy [Ville Miettinen](#). Time of day photo courtesy [Delgoff](#). Surroundings photo courtesy [Eric Murray](#). Managing your workload photo courtesy [Brad](#).*

# Chapter 12: How to Work in Different Timezones



*This chapter was contributed by Zapier content marketer Matthew Guay.*

“It’s a small world after all.” The Disney song rings true when you run into someone at random in a city of millions, or when you cross the globe in a day. But somehow, nothing shrinks the globe like building a company with a team that’s distributed across three continents.

Twice a year, the Zapier team gets together [at a company retreat](#). We plan what we’ll do next, and catch up on what’s happened with our teammates over the last six months. The rest of the year, we manage to work together across seven time zones, using Slack, GoToMeeting, and some sheer effort to stay connected.

Face it: the best job for you might not be in your hometown, and you might work better when you aren’t shackled to a 9-to-5 workday. And that’s ok with a remote position, as long as you can manage the time shift. Your team will likely get more done, and you’ll be able to provide better support for your customers—but you’ll also need to figure out how to make the world feel a bit smaller.

After six years of remote work—for companies in India, Canada, Australia, and the U.S.—I’ve learned how to make the most of the pros and overcome the cons that crop up when the world is your office. Here are five tips that you can use to take advantage of a time shift, and six ways to tackle the most common problems that a remote teams faces.

---

## **5 Pros of Remote Work, and How to Take Advantage**

1. Hire Around the Globe to Snag the Best Employees
2. Offer Freedom of Time and Place to Boost Productivity
3. Spread Across Time Zones to Work Around the Clock
4. Work Solo to Destroy Distractions
5. Stay Accountable to Focus on the Important Things

## **6 Cons of Remote Work, and How to Overcome**

1. There’s no Constant Collaboration, so Own Your Own Projects
  2. Meetings Might be Late (or Early), so Be Flexible
  3. It’s Tough to Stay In Sync, so Check in With Your Team
  4. You Still Need to Socialize, so Have a Virtual Water Cooler
  5. Your Work Can be Overlooked, so Work in Public
  6. Time Zones are Merciless so Keep Your Clocks Synced
-

## 5 Pros of Remote Work, and How to Take Advantage

### 1. Hire Around the Globe to Snag the Best Employees

“Letting people work remotely is about ... getting access to the best people wherever they are,” write [Basecamp](#) co-founders Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson in their book *Remote: Office Not Required*. Remote job board [We Work Remotely](#) says hiring a distributed team can help you “find the most qualified people in the most unexpected places.”

That’s music to the ears of metropolitan-based startups, like those in Silicon Valley and London fighting to hire great employees in a crowded market. As Automattic founder [Matt Mullenweg](#) wrote, “If 95% of great programmers aren’t in the U.S., and an even higher percentage not in the Bay Area, set up your company to take advantage of that fact as a strength, not a weakness.” But hiring from anywhere only works with one crucial element: a time shift.

It’s possible to hire people around the globe and still have your whole team working 9-to-5 at your office’s time zone—after all, plenty of people work night shifts—but it’s not optimal.

“The problems with remote work are more apparent if the team expects remote team members to be available at company timezone rather than theirs,” says [Mutahhir Ali Hayat](#), a Pakistan-based developer who has worked on a number of remote teams. “It can quickly lead to burnout.”

### 2. Offer Freedom of Time and Place to Boost Productivity

“It’s only sensible and wise to live in an area where you can do your best work.” - Neil Patel, entrepreneur

The freedom to work from anywhere you desire is an attractive benefit—but it’s only true freedom when you can also work *when-ever* you’d like.

“The key to remote work is living where you work best,” says [Neil Patel](#) in [Entrepreneur Magazine](#). “Your environment does impact how you work. Thus, it’s only sensible and wise to live in an area where you can do your best work.”

Fried and Hansson offer another upside to remote work in their book on the topic. “The big transition with a distributed workforce is going from synchronous to asynchronous collaboration,” they write. “Not only do we not have to be in the same spot to work together, we also don’t have to work at the same time to work together.”

9-to-5 isn’t for everyone. Neither is Silicon Valley, or the city where your company is based. Some of us [do our best work late at night](#)—as Zapier co-founder Mike Knoop does—while others prefer to get up early and spend the late afternoons away from the desk. And while some metropolitan areas offer some lifestyle perks, other big-city issues—like cost-of-living and long commutes—will drive potential employees away.

### 3. Spread Across Time Zones to Work Around the Clock



The sun never sets on the British empire—even today—and it doesn't need to set on your company, either. Aside from the few weeks every year when we're all together at our [company retreats](#), there's always someone at Zapier awake and working. Time zone coverage is just something that's automatically possible with remote teams.

The Zapier marketing team, for example, works from Bangkok, Portland (Maine), Omaha, Nashville, and San Francisco. That makes scheduling meetings difficult, but we can hand off work to keep the wheels turning 24/7. I can write an article during the day in Bangkok, and my teammate Joe in Portland can edit it while I sleep. By the time I wake up, I've got corrections to work on. At the same time, Danny in Omaha can begin working with a new partner during the day, and I can pick up the remaining tasks as soon as he quits work at 5 p.m.

[Jon Russell](#), a Bangkok-based reporter for TechCrunch, says remote

work is what enables their site to run a 24-hour newsroom. “When it comes to online publishing, being in different places isn’t so strange,” says Russell.

Marketing and reporting aren’t the only jobs that benefit from a time shift. A global support team, for instance, can provide 24/7 support to your customers without forcing anyone to pull a night shift. Or, if you have system administrators around the globe, no one needs to have their sleep disrupted for emergency server issues.

“It was like having a friend in the future.” - Scott Berkun

The team behind [MINR](#), an upcoming news-discovery app for iOS devices, has found that a time-shifted team has accelerated their product development. “The good thing about [a global team] is work gets done while I sleep, so we’re always working,” says MINR founder Sol Weinreich, whose team is distributed between the U.S. and Israel. “I’ll send instructions in the middle of the night—like 11 p.m. to 1 a.m.—and wake up in the morning with stuff delivered.”

Microsoft’s Internet Explorer team found success planning work around time shifts, too—even when their employees were located in offices at both locations. [Scott Berkun](#), in his book *The Year Without Pants*, relates that Microsoft’s U.S. and India teams worked in a system called “Follow the Sun.”

“They worked the night shift while my team in Redmond worked days,” Berkun says. “If I planned well, we’d find magic in going to bed frustrated by a missing puzzle piece, and waking to find it in our inbox. It was like having a friend in the future.”

As [Couchsurfing](#) designer [Ben Hanna](#) wrote, “Good timing can make a project literally zip around the globe with work being completed 24 hours a day.”

## 4. Work Solo to Destroy Distractions



Escape all the distractions ... for real

Keeping projects rolling 24/7 may boost your team’s output, but there’s something else about working at different times that might make you even more productive: silence.

“I always say I love the fact that my mornings are quiet,” says Zapier developer Rob Golding, who works in the UK, a few hours ahead of the rest of the Zapier development team. Zapier support team member Lindsay Brand echoed that sentiment: “One of the benefits is the quiet time to concentrate without getting distracted by chatting to your colleagues.”

Working remotely *already* frees you from the standard workplace distractions of parties and water cooler talk, but GIF wars in Slack and random questions can quickly distract you just as much no matter where you’re working. And that’s nice—we all need human interaction, and it’s great that you can still get that without being in the same room.

Too much of a good thing, though, can mean getting nothing done. A time difference gives you the freedom to code or write without distraction. Then, when the rest of the team is online, you'll be more focused at what you *need* to discuss with them before it's time to get offline.

## 5. Stay Accountable to Focus on the Important Things



**It's not the time that's important. It's what you do with the time.**

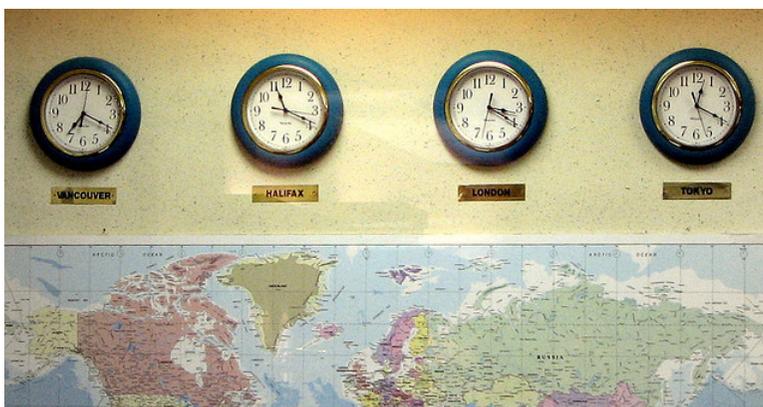
Teams in traditional office settings measure productivity by how long each team member spends at his or her desk (I'm only half kidding). But remote teams can fall into the "I'm online, so I'm being productive" trap, too.

A time shift, though, forces you to show what you've actually accomplished, since few others were there to see if you were logged in all day.

"A remote work environment should encourage performance—not presence," says entrepreneur Neil Patel. Then, you won't have to worry about time off and how many hours people are working. "You are simply looking for high-performers who can get stuff done."

The ability to hand off work is a productivity benefit, but it's also motivator since you know you *must* accomplish tasks so you can hand them off to co-workers at day's end. "It puts a little pressure on you to get your work done," says TechCrunch's Russell.

## 6 Cons of Remote Work, and How to Overcome Them



Hopefully you won't need this many clocks to stay in sync with your team

Even if you've never stepped foot in a "traditional" workplace, TV shows like "The Office" paint a grim picture: the endless meetings, random interruptions, and droning water cooler chats. Those may be exaggerated stereotypes—and traditional offices *do* have some redeeming qualities—but they're universal, none the less.

Remote teams need their own conventions and tools, too, to make everything flow smoothly together. Whiteboards and cork-boards are obsolete in a remote environment, and even paper calendars and analogue clocks feel archaic. As [Virtuali](#) CEO Sean Graber wrote in the [Harvard Business Review](#), "It's important to create formal processes that simulate the informal ways we touch base when we

are physically collocated.”

You’ll need new ways to make your work, well, *work*, so here are a few challenges the distributed teams at Zapier and other remote companies have faced while working remotely with a time shift, and how they overcome them.

## 1. There’s no Constant Collaboration, so Own Your Own Projects

“Hire managers of one.” - [Basecamp](#), the company

Teamwork is great. But, if you’re working with a time shift, you’ll need to pull your own weight on the team and lead your own way. If you’re always waiting for someone to tell you what to do next, and that someone’s asleep while you’re working, you’ll never get anything done.

That’s why the most crucial part of building a remote team is hiring self-directed workers—“managers of one,” as the Basecamp team calls them in their book *Rework*.

“You want someone who’s capable of building something from scratch and seeing it through. Finding these people frees the rest of your team to work more and manage less,” the book explains.

Zapier’s CEO Wade Foster agrees, saying that the most important tenet in running a remote team is being able to “trust people to do stuff.” To make that possible, he says, “have a project you own so there’s always something to jump into.” That way, you’ll never be waiting on the next big thing you need to do.

It might not be possible—or even desirable—for each team member to take ownership of part of your company’s work, but you can break projects up in a way that everyone has their own specific area to focus on. This strategy makes your projects asynchronous,



That's good—after all, you'll still want some team interaction. But it also means you'll need to be flexible about times.

“Any remote worker knows you have to be flexible, so I feel time zone differences don't impact your remote work life too much,” says Zapier's Brand, who works in Barcelona. “I'd quite happily sacrifice staying a little later or getting up a little earlier to avoid the stresses of a morning commute in rush hour traffic.”

Staying up a bit late or getting up an hour earlier isn't a bad tradeoff for a job you love, but how about 2 a.m.? That's what *The Year Without Pants* author Berkun encountered when he worked at Automattic. “My team had hit the natural limits of space and time on planet earth,” Berkun says. “For us to speak at the same time, someone would have to be miserable.”

At Zapier, we encountered a similar issue with our weekly team meetings—for the marketing team, they typically occur in the mornings for U.S.-based team members and at 10 p.m. for me in Bangkok. When daylight saving time went into effect, though, suddenly I was looking at an 11 p.m.-midnight meeting.

6:30 a.m. Bangkok time—and late afternoon/early evening U.S. time—turned out to be our winter solution. Both times have worked out for us, but they've forced each of us to be a bit flexible.

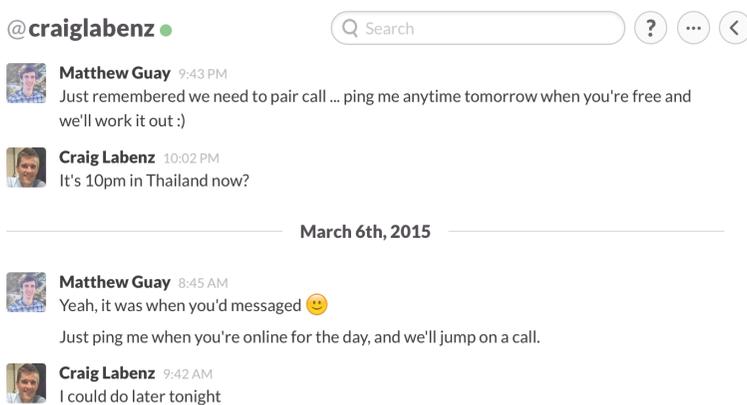
“I'd quite happily stay a little later or get up a little earlier to avoid the stresses of a morning commute” -  
Lindsay Brand

It doesn't need to be terrible: just try to limit long meetings so you're not straining someone's schedule. And if you're joining a team from far away, be prepared to be the most flexible one.

It might even work out great for you, if you like to work non-traditional hours anyhow. Software engineer [Kevin Furbish](#) found this to be true about his remote team at Intuit. “Many of us tend to work crazy hours, which mitigates being in different time zones.”

But even still, if you want to make a distributed team work, you need to accept a time shift. “I’ll take phone calls late in the evening from folks that don’t realize I’m on the east coast and consider that part of the job for someone working remotely in a different time zone,” Furbish says.

### 3. It’s Tough to Stay In Sync, so Check in With Your Team



The screenshot shows a Slack channel for @craiglabenz. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation icons. The conversation starts with a message from Matthew Guay at 9:43 PM: "Just remembered we need to pair call ... ping me anytime tomorrow when you're free and we'll work it out :)". This is followed by a message from Craig Labenz at 10:02 PM: "It's 10pm in Thailand now?". A date separator indicates "March 6th, 2015". The next message is from Matthew Guay at 8:45 AM: "Yeah, it was when you'd messaged 😊". He then says, "Just ping me when you're online for the day, and we'll jump on a call.". The final message is from Craig Labenz at 9:42 AM: "I could do later tonight".

#### Working out a call for a Zapier pair partner meeting

Planning meetings across time zones might sound so painful that you’d rather just never have meetings—but don’t do that either.

Marketer [Belle Beth Cooper](#), writing about [working remotely on the Buffer team](#) says that “it’s important to check in before you start your workday and make sure you’re on the same page as everyone else.” You might be a “manager of one,” but if you’re going to hand off projects across time zones, you’ll need to stay in touch.

At Zapier, we stay connected with our team in a number of ways. We post thoughts and updates about team projects on Slack, regardless of who’s online. Plus, each department has a weekly video call to map out that week’s work, and every Thursday we’ll

have an all-hands-on-deck call in order to get everyone together.

Every employee is also assigned a random “[pair partner](#)” each week— that means we’ll jump on a call with one of our colleagues just see how things are going, and perhaps work together on a cross-team project.

“Check in before you start your workday and make sure you’re on the same page as everyone else.” - Belle Beth Cooper

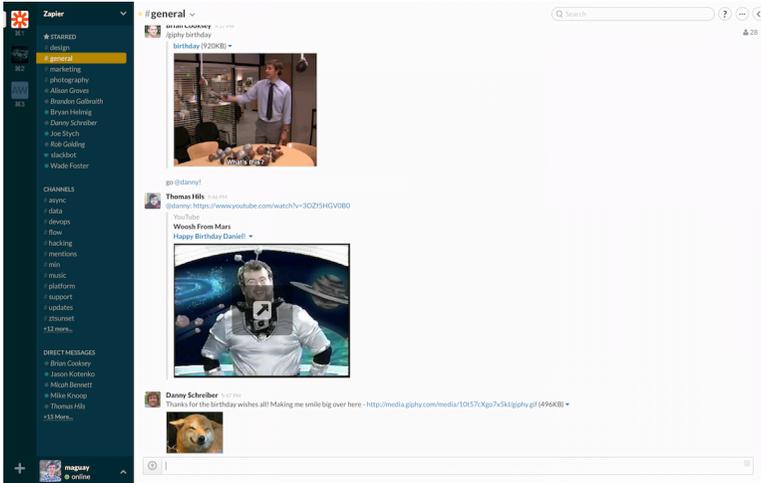
The [Couchsurfing](#) team has a similar schedule to make sure everyone’s connected. “We have a bi-monthly full company meeting to make sure we all know we still exist,” [writes designer Ben Hanna](#). “You may not need to do this, but for us it is good to hear voices we may not interact with on a daily basis.” The Couchsurfing team also has “one-on-one meetings, conversations and project management meetings to keep everyone on task,” just as our team does.

If you have a large distributed team, you might not need to try so hard to stay connected. Berkun found this out while working at Automattic. “Since there are people working from nearly every time zone in the world, there was always someone online to help with a problem or joke around with when you’re working,” he wrote in his book.

Even still, odds are you’ll be working with *someone* who’s not online at the same time as you. For that, be sure to try a bit harder to stay in touch. It’s worth it.

FaceTime and Skype are great for quick one-to-one calls, [Google Hangouts](#) are great for team meetings and broadcasted meetings, and GoToMeeting is still the best tool we’ve found for getting a huge team on a call together. You might even want to [get a Twilio number](#) so your teammates can call you without an international call. Whatever works best for your team, just put the effort into staying connected.

## 4. You Still Need to Socialize, so Have a Virtual Water Cooler



Business and banter in Zapier's Slack #general channel

Staying in touch with everyone is easy nowadays. You can work at opposite times from the rest of your team, and *still* join in on all the office banter. The trick is a team chat app—for us, that's [Slack](#).

“One of the sad parts of working at a different time to the majority of your team is missing out on all the work chatter, but with tools like Slack, it's easy to catch up on that and get involved a little later,” explained Zapier's Brand.

It's impossible to overstate how crucial Slack—a team chat app that makes it easy to search through all of your team's messages—is to remote teams. It's the one app that comes up in nearly *every* discussion of how to make remote teams work. Even reporters from *The New York Times* have found that Slack helps them stay connected to their newsroom while away on assignments.

“One danger of my job, as a columnist who works in California, is a feeling of disconnection from the mother ship in New York,” wrote

technology columnist [Farhad Manjoo](#). “Using Slack, I can peer into discussions that would never have been accessible to me. I can see how the producers and editors who are handling my column are discussing how to present it, and how the team overseeing the home page is thinking about my work.”

“I have a feeling of intimacy with co-workers on the other side of the country that is almost fun. That’s a big deal, for a job.” - Farhad Manjoo, New York Times reporter

The ability to see what others are saying not only gives you insight to how others are working—something you might glean by working together—but it also enables the more fun aspects of working in a team. “What’s more, I have a feeling of intimacy with co-workers on the other side of the country that is almost fun,” Manjoo says. “That’s a big deal, for a job.”

No matter how independently you can work, and how hard you try to stay connected, you won’t be in the flow of what everyone’s doing unless you have a team chat tool. “At TechCrunch and The Next Web, having a central point of contact is critical,” says Russell. “Tools like Slack, Convo and HipChat make that possible in a way that it never really was a few years ago.”

It doesn’t have to be Slack—it could be HipChat, Campfire, your own IRC server, or any of the other [great team chat apps](#) out there. Just be sure it fits this description:

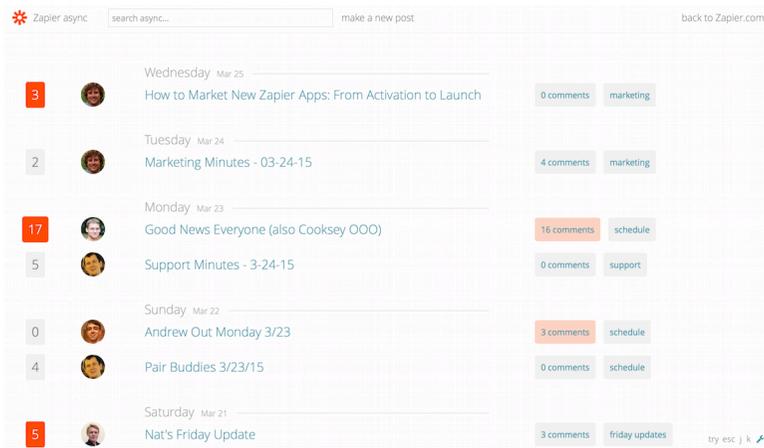
- Easy to use, with mobile apps to stay in touch on the go
- Separates discussions into groups that everyone can join
- Archives all conversations so you can search through everything
- Includes private chats
- Integrates with the apps you use

- Has fun extras like Slack’s Giphy integration that lets you lighten up the mood with GIFs

**Using Slack?** Here are some popular ways to use app automation tool [Zapier](#) to share activity in your channels so everyone knows what’s going on:

- [Get Slack notifications for new Google Drive files in a folder](#)
- [Send Twitter Mentions to a Slack Channel](#)
- [Post Trello Activity and Notifications to Slack](#)
- [Share new RSS items in a Slack channel or privately via Slackbot](#)
- [Stay on top of Github Issues with Slack](#)

## 5. Your Work Can be Overlooked, so Work in Public



### Async, Zapier’s internal company blog

It’s not enough to use Slack as your virtual watercooler. To work effectively with a time shift, you’ll also need to work in public. In

other words, communicate, and make sure everyone knows what you're working on.

Write what you've done that day, share where you're hung up on a project, and ping others with ideas. Developers, perhaps, have it the easiest with code comments and pull requests, but everyone should share what's happening in their own "manager of one" domain.

[David Fullerton](#) had to overcome the communication hurdle when he was growing the Stack Exchange team. "When there were 4 people, everyone knew everything. When there are 75 people that no longer scales," he says. "So you have to work out your channels of communication, and that's doubly true with remote workers because you can't rely on overheard conversations or gossip to spread the word. You have to force yourself to be explicit in communication."

At Zapier, we've formalized communications about what we're working on with two things: a *Minutes* document from each of our team meetings that outlines our goals for each week, and a *Friday Update* post that covers which of those goals we actually accomplished. Each of those live in *Async*—an in-house tool that gives everyone a set place to write anything they need to share with the entire team, and forces us to "work in public."

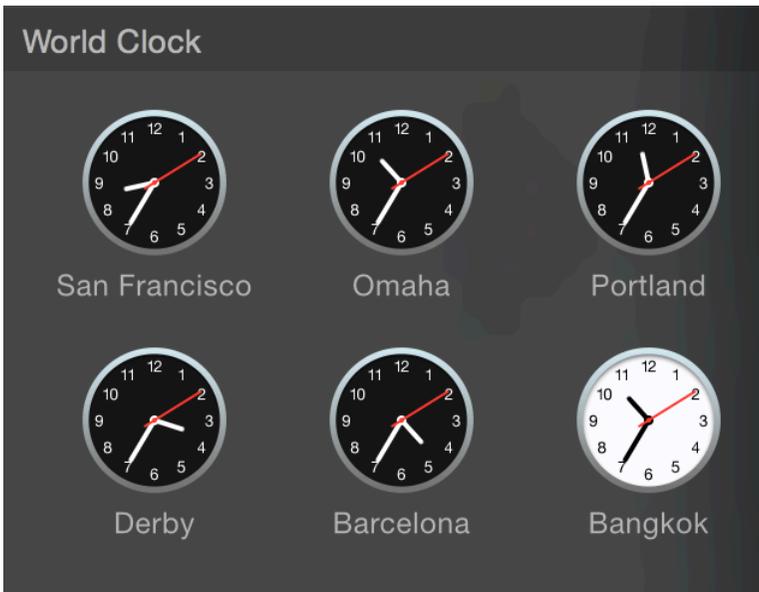
"You have to force yourself to be explicit in communication." - David Fullerton

Sometimes you need someone to hold you accountable, or just to work alongside you. Jeff Atwood found that when he [started Stack Overflow](#), programming on his own turned into a lonely job.

"I was coding alone," he says. "Really alone. One guy working all by yourself alone. This didn't work at all for me. I was unmoored, directionless, suffering from analysis paralysis, and barely able to get motivated enough to write even a few lines of code."

His solution was to have a coding partner, someone he'd bounce ideas off of and check in with about project progress. Work together, even if there is a time gap, and you'll find that the old adage "two are better than one" is still true.

## 6. Time Zones are Merciless so Keep Your Clocks Synced



Even your 'world clock' widgets can come in handy

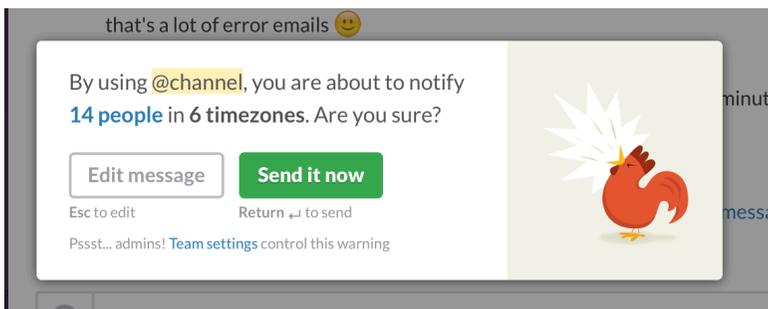
**GMT**—otherwise known as UTC—is a beautiful thing. It's the "mean solar time at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London" according to Wikipedia, and it's what every time zone is based on. If it's midnight in London (GMT), then it's 7 a.m. in Bangkok (GMT+7) and 8 p.m. the previous day in New York (GMT-4).

If you travel the world frequently, knowing which a time zone you're in relative to GMT is crucial—and it's also important if you're

working with a distributed team. Knowing the difference between Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific time alone isn't enough anymore. You'll need to know the new year starts in Japan, which times of the day you're colleague in London will be awake, and the times you're most likely to get support tickets from your Australian customers.

It's not actually that hard, as long as you think about it relative to GMT/UTC. Know how many hours you are from GMT, and then it's simple to know what time it is in any other time zone. And keep your brain thinking in the time zone where most of your team is located, or the time zone you use to schedule content and plan releases. Don't just assume that since you're "in the future" compared to the rest of your team that you have more time—I've fallen into that fallacy far too often.

Beyond those mental tricks, you'll want to rely on your apps to prevent mishaps. Sometimes, they can be so clever, you'll never have to worry about anything.



Slack's time zone warning

Slack, for instance, lists each team member's time zone, how many hours that is from your local time, and that person's current local time whenever you click their name. That's an easy way to double-check before expecting an immediate reply. Or, if you attempt to message everyone in a group, Slack lets you know it's late for some people before you hit "send."

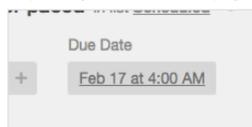
**Tip:** If you're working on distributed team—or just have friends around the world—turn on your phone's “Do Not Disturb” mode so it won't ding with notifications all night. Here's how to do that on [iOS](#) and [Android](#).



**Danny Schreiber** 11:35 AM

@channel heads up -- publish dates in Trello are now set to 4 a.m. -- this makes is globally the same day for us all 😊

<http://i.imgur.com/wt11vUS.png> (12KB) ▾



now no more confusion for our Bangkok office, hehe



**Matthew Guay** 11:37 AM

😊 Nice stuff, thanks for getting that figured out @danny!

time zones are more annoying than exchange rates

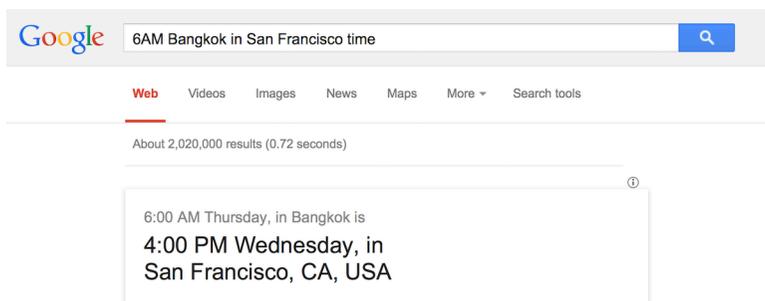
### Use workarounds to make your apps work for multiple time zones

Other apps *don't* make it so easy, though. Trello, for instance, stores deadlines in UTC and then displays their due date and time based on your current timezone. That made articles on our schedule look like they were due a day later for me in Bangkok. To overcome this limitation, we worked to find a time to schedule tasks where the due day would be the same for all.

You might find that you need to tweak some things—say, using the same time zone settings in everyone's apps—to make it all look correct, but it's worth the time. After all, a broken schedule can make your remote team's work fall apart entirely .

Beyond that, if you're still having trouble tracking time and scheduling meetings with your whole team, here are some tools that have come in handy for us:

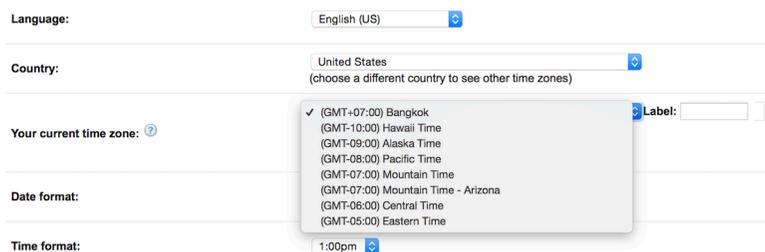
[Google](#)



Google really does know everything. If you search for the current time in most major cities around the world, you'll get the answer right at the top of your results. More recently, Google added a time calculator to search so you can look up what time it *will* be in a certain place.

That might not be enough to schedule meetings across a number of time zones, but it's a quick way to figure out if you're ok to call your boss at 6 p.m.

## Google Calendar



Google Calendar looks basic at first glance, but it's **packed with features** that make it great for remote teams—or really any team. You can set your own time zone, and save the time zones you work with most to have an easy way to switch between them.

Then, if you want another easy way to know what time it is everywhere your team's located, you can turn on the World clock

in the Calendar Labs settings. It's a simple, text-based world clock provides an at-a-glance update.

**Tip:** Find more great ways to optimize Google Calendar in our roundup of [30 Google Calendar hacks and tricks](#).

## Every Time Zone



For an even simpler way to see what time it is around the world, check out [Every Time Zone](#) from the [Freckle](#) team. It shows the current time in your own city, along with others in popular time zones around the world.

Drag the second indicator to the time you want to have a meeting, and you'll see what time that'll be in cities around the globe. It's not a perfect way to schedule, but is a good way to get a feel for international time differences.

## World Clock Meeting Planner

UTC-time	Bangkok	Omaha	Portland	San Francisco	Nashville
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 17:00:00	Fri 00:00	Thu 12:00 *	Thu 13:00 *	Thu 10:00 *	Thu 12:00 *
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 18:00:00	Fri 01:00	Thu 13:00 *	Thu 14:00 *	Thu 11:00 *	Thu 13:00 *
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 19:00:00	Fri 02:00	Thu 14:00 *	Thu 15:00 *	Thu 12:00 *	Thu 14:00 *
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 20:00:00	Fri 03:00	Thu 15:00 *	Thu 16:00 *	Thu 13:00 *	Thu 15:00 *
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 21:00:00	Fri 04:00	Thu 16:00 *	Thu 17:00 *	Thu 14:00 *	Thu 16:00 *
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 22:00:00	Fri 05:00	Thu 17:00 *	Thu 18:00 *	Thu 15:00 *	Thu 17:00 *
Thursday, 16 April 2015, 23:00:00	Fri 06:00	Thu 18:00 *	Thu 19:00 *	Thu 16:00 *	Thu 18:00 *
Friday, 17 April 2015, 00:00:00	Fri 07:00	Thu 19:00 *	Thu 20:00 *	Thu 17:00 *	Thu 19:00 *
Friday, 17 April 2015, 01:00:00	Fri 08:00	Thu 20:00 *	Thu 21:00 *	Thu 18:00 *	Thu 20:00 *
Friday, 17 April 2015, 02:00:00	Fri 09:00	Thu 21:00 *	Thu 22:00 *	Thu 19:00 *	Thu 21:00 *
Friday, 17 April 2015, 03:00:00	Fri 10:00	Thu 22:00 *	Thu 23:00 *	Thu 20:00 *	Thu 22:00 *
Friday, 17 April 2015, 04:00:00	Fri 11:00	Thu 23:00 *	Fri 00:00 *	Thu 21:00 *	Thu 23:00 *

TimeandDate.com's [World Clock Meeting Planner](#) won't win any design awards, but it makes time shift scheduling straightforward. You pick the cities where everyone lives, and the date for your meeting, and it'll show in green, yellow, and red the times that are best, not *too* bad, and terrible for everyone.

You might find that there's no perfect time for your team, but at least you'll find options that aren't excruciating. Plus, you can add the correct time to your calendar in just a click, if you'd like.

There are more time zone tools at [TimeandDate.com](#), too, so be sure to check it out if you want to find local times around the world for your event, convert times for any location, and more.

## World Meeting Time



Prefer something more eye-catching? Then [World Meeting Time](#) might be more your style. Just drag placeholders to the spots on the map where your team lives, enter when you want to hold the meeting, and see what time that'll be locally for everyone before sending invites.

It's not as simple to pick the perfect time here, but it's easy to spot where everyone lives and send group meeting invites.

## Build Your Own Small World

Remote working isn't automatically a freer way to work—it can be just as stressful as any 9-to-5 job. Teach your remote team to be flexible about time, though, and everyone's lives will be easier. Plus, you'll be able to hire the best people from anywhere around the globe.

That might mean you can move to a city where it's easier to start a family, or extend your “vacation” to a few months on the beach each year. You might even find time to visit some of the incredible cities on [Nomad List](#) while still contributing your all to your team.

*Written by Zapier content marketer [Matthew Guay](#)*

*Image Credits: Plane photo by [Christian Junker](#); Always Open photo by [Jeremy Brooks](#); Quiet photo by [José María Pérez Nuñez](#); Clock photo by [Matthew Guay](#); Meeting photo by [John Benson](#).*

# Chapter 13: How to Avoid Burnout in a Remote Team



*This chapter was contributed by Zapier community manager Alison Groves*

Working remotely is a wonderful thing. It allows you to work when it's best for your schedule, giving your teammates and company the chance to have your best work. It also lets you call your own shots, leaving you more creative, happier, and healthier (hello no germs spreading around an office!).

But there is a tendency to work *more* while working remotely. When your home is your office, it's hard to put separation between your work life and personal life. Though total control is great, not being able to pull yourself away from work can more easily lead to burnout.

When you're part of a distributed team, what's the best way to cope and balance the great aspects about remote working with the sometimes-not-so-great parts? We posed that question to 22 members of remote teams around the world. Here's their responses, with actionable ways to help you not get burned out while working remotely. And even if you work in a traditional, on-site team, you'll

likely find tips here to help you keep balance in today's mobile-first, always connected world.

---

1. Establish and Maintain a Routine
  2. Set and Stick to Priorities
  3. Create and Keep Boundaries
  4. Take Short and Long Breaks
  5. Make Time for Human Interaction
- 

## 1. Establish and Maintain a Routine

**Courtney Seiter, Content Crafter at [Buffer](#)**

The best thing I did for myself in adapting to remote work has been to create morning and evening routines. In the morning, I have a routine of a quick workout, stretching and meditation, and in the afternoon/evening I take the dogs on a walk and then work on my Spanish. The routines change a bit based on the season (in the summer there's a lot more gardening), but it actually doesn't matter so much what they include.

The main thing for me was that putting these routines in place has the effect of sort of approximating a commute time (although much nicer!) and signaling to my brain when work time is starting in the morning and ending in the evening. It can be tough as a remote worker to distinguish between work and non-work time, and these routines help me a lot.



Courtney Seiter's evening routine involves walking her dog Cecil.

### **Jess Byrne, Customer Champion at Zapier**

It's definitely important to have a hard stop. There is always work to be done and you'll have to accept that it's not possible to finish all of it. If you try, you will burnout. I've done that to myself in a previous job and it's not fun and you grow easily exhausted.

## **Mercer Smith-Looper, Customer Service Integrations Specialist at Campaign Monitor**

I keep a hyper-set schedule. To give you a little insight into this, I was the 5 year old that would get mad at my parents when they told me that there was no schedule for the day while we were on vacation. That has kind of—*er*—persisted through my life, much to the chagrin of my husband and friends. It sounds counterintuitive, but having a set schedule means that I *stick to it* rather than having the propensity of most other remote workers to not maintain balance between home life and work life. So, I wake up at 8:30, make coffee and breakfast for my husband, walk my dog, and then work. At 12ish everyday, I either nap with my dog or take a walk and eat depending if I'm hungry. I finish at about 5:30 everyday, unless I have a late call or something, and then do the same thing most nights. I always make sure to shut off my computer and not turn it back on until going back to work the next day.

I've heard statistics somewhere that when you work remotely because there are so few distractions for you (if you're of a certain personality type, that is, which I would argue you need to be if you're going to work remotely), you get a ton more work done than you would if you were in an office. I use this as a kind of justification in my crazy brain to keep to this set schedule. My home is my safe place, and I need to respect and honor it just as I try to do my own sanity by keeping a schedule, and making sure that I don't get into the habit of burning that midnight oil.

## **Rachel Muircroft, Software Engineer at Bentley Systems**

I've worked remotely from my house now for 7 years and the one thing that I try to do consistently—and sometimes it's really hard—is keep office hours (between 8 and 6). It has kept me disciplined and over time my colleagues have been able to learn what my hours are, too. This is important for me because I like to try and

get involved in collaboration projects as much as possible. It pushes the communication both ways more—and it's also more noticeable when teammates start heading home at the end of the day.

There are times though, when working on projects alone can't be avoided and when I'm in that situation, I make sure I get outside at lunchtime, see people, plan my tasks to keep to the hours and check in with the office often. I even have my monitor dim slightly using the software [f.lux](#) to let me know it's getting late in the day and to think about finishing up.

I've recently moved further down the east coast of Scotland, too, so I try and take regular 5 minute breaks just to stand up and look out the window at the sort-of sea view.

“My home is my safe place, and I need to respect and honor it just as I try to do my own sanity by keeping a schedule.” - Mercer Smith-Looper, Campaign Monitor

### **Alison Groves, Community Caretaker at [Zapier](#)**

For myself, keeping my mind and spirits in tip top shape has everything to do with establishing a routine. I'm an early riser, so I get up at 5:30am every day, work 90 minutes, take an hour to run for a few miles and eat breakfast, then tackle the day. I also find it extremely important to have a natural end to my day, which for me is preparing dinner. I use meal delivery service [Blue Apron](#) to bring me ingredients to cook for myself or friends, and know that I have to end my day and take care of myself in a healthful manner by cooking.

I do my absolute best to hold steadfast to this routine whether I'm at home or on the road. Tasks get done under those constraints, and I'm putting a large importance on my own well being.

---

## 2. Set and Stick to Priorities

### **Kate Stull, Co-Founder of Popforms**

In the early days of Popforms, I used to work all the time. In the morning, I would grab my laptop and pull it into bed with me, and dive into email almost as soon as I woke up. I'd work all day, sometimes forgetting to change out of pajamas, and then I'd be curled up with the computer, writing blog posts, back in bed at night. It was bad.

Not surprisingly, I got pretty burnt out doing that. I was working every day of the week, unhappy, never feeling done, and focusing more on quantity than quality. But I figured if I was working all day, I must be pretty important and doing pretty important things, right?

Then one day I realized the work was never going to stop. There is always more to do, and when you work remotely, there is no one to tell you to go home or that the office is closing, so it has to be YOU who decides when to stop. You have to decide that the rest of your life is worth making space for, and not let work take over that time.

When I decided to cut back my working hours (I don't check email after 6 p.m., I don't work weekends, I don't bring my computer to bed), it made me focus on quality over quantity. I had to make sure I was maximizing my 7-8 working hours, instead of just aimlessly moving from task to task over 12-14 hours a day, or being overly reactive to small fires and delaying more important work.

I worked with my cofounder to define the most important priorities for my role, so that when 5 p.m. rolls around I can ask myself, 'Have I done the most important work I could do today?' And when I can say yes to that, then I can log off, recharge, and invest in the other areas of my life. That is what makes it possible for me to keep working without getting burnt out.

## **Josh Pigford, Founder of [Baremetrics](#)**

I think things like ‘motivation,’ ‘procrastination’ and ‘burnout’ are all kind of intertwined and burnout, to me, is essentially the sum of choosing to work on the wrong things for too long. We’re naturally motivated by successful feedback loops, and you get burned out when that feedback loops gets broken over and over again for too long.

Show up, work on things that move the needle and you’ll be fine.

“Like your grocery list, most things can wait until tomorrow. Set aside time for work and rest.” - Chris Gallo, Highrise

## **Chris Gallo, Support at [Highrise](#)**

The feeling creeps up and the next thing you know you’re answering your first email at 6:45 am and replying to another one at 9:15 pm.

Burnout is real. Don’t fight it. You can’t win.

A great analogy that I’ve found useful is to think of work as grocery shopping. You don’t drop everything and go out to the store the instant you’re running low on cookies. If you did, you would waste a lot of time and energy.

You make a list, find time to go to the store, and stock up all at once. But with work, we’re constantly plugged in, always checking email, and dropping everything when we don’t have to.

Like your grocery list, most things can wait until tomorrow. Set aside time for work and rest. Do nothing. And don’t feel guilty about it. Your mind will reward you later.

**Kyle Gray, Content Marketing Manager at WP Curve**

I am most vulnerable to burnout when I lose track of what's important in my work. It's hard to say no to tasks or opportunities and stay focused on what is really valuable in my work. I start to take on little extra tasks and projects that I think are important, but are just distractions. Before I know it I am spinning a bunch of plates and the quality of my work and my life start to suffer. Days where I jump between different tasks, projects and emails leave me feeling exhausted and stressed.

There's a couple of things I do to refocus:

- Identify what is essential and what's not - For me that is creating content, anything that is not creating new content needs to get cut out. Setting clear goals helps keep you on track. My goals are very simple: I need at least 10 posts published on the WP Curve blog each month.
- Get organized - I plan out my next week and book time for the important things. When the time is blocked out in advance, it's easier to say 'no' to distractions. It also means less creative energy is wasted making decisions in my day.

Getting refocused always seems to reduce my stress and burnout. I feel fulfilled and energized on days when I singularly focus on a single task.



Kyle Gray takes time to get refocused.

### **Gavin Zuchlinski, founder of [Acuity Scheduling](#)**

Before working on Acuity full time, I worked for a government agency in a classified environment. One nice side effect was that it was almost impossible to bring work home with you (absolutely no quick checking e-mails on your phone!). Burnout definitely happened there, but it was more obvious because you would be physically at work too much.

During that time I worked on Acuity part time, so I'd squeeze in work on it whenever I had a free moment. That definitely formed some bad habits I'm still trying to break. Now that I'm full time on Acuity there's no need to squeeze in work when I can, but it's still

a habit to check e-mails when I can, or whenever I have an idea to test it out.

When I was working on Acuity part time, limited time was a forcing factor. I had plenty of ideas and when I was finally able to implement them, they were full formed in my mind and my execution was efficient. Now with more time there's less of a need of efficiency, so it's easy to run with a less mature idea, only to find time wasted, or spend time ruminating on and researching things which really don't benefit the core of my business.

My feeling is that having fewer constraints on my time is leading to more overwork, and more burnout.

---

### 3. Create and Keep Boundaries

#### Janet Choi, Marketer at [Customer.io](#)

The remote worker's greatest challenge might be herself/himself. While one of the [best benefits of working remotely is flexibility](#), that can turn into too much pliancy over where work ends and life begins.

When I first started working remotely, I reverted to a college night-owl schedule, where I was getting up and going to sleep later than the rest of humanity—and failing to spend all that time in between in a disciplined way. So I felt like I was never getting enough done AND failing to deal with my wellbeing and everyday life. That puts you in a continuous dangerous downward-spiral that leads not just to one-time but habitual burnout.

“The remote worker's greatest challenge might be herself/himself.” - Janet Choi, [Customer.io](#)

When you're the decider over how you spend your hours, you also have to be more proactive about sticking to priorities and setting boundaries—that's part of your job. I find myself returning to something Marissa Mayer says about burnout (no matter the Yahoo policy for remote work) how important it is to **find your rhythm** and protect it to avoid burnout. For me, that rhythm means taking time to reflect and celebrate progress when planning, and setting boundaries like working outside of my apartment at a co-working space or scheduling deliberate non-work time into my week.

### **Jess Scott, Founder of [jessINK](#)**

Set boundaries. While it's important to get work done in a timely manner, remote work doesn't mean that you absolutely need to be online or available 24/7. Also, schedule some time for relaxing/socializing and/or close, supportive relationships. Remote work offers flexibility, and I appreciate the work-life balance that comes with that.

---

## **4. Take Short and Long Breaks**

### **Chase Clemons, Support at [Basecamp](#)**

Take a three-day weekend every now and then. Make sure to get away from everything for a week or two each year. With our team, we recognize that sometimes you just need to get away and recharge. So every three years, we give each person a thirty-day sabbatical. Regular breaks and vacations go a long way towards **preventing burnout**.

**Tom Moor, Co-Founder of [Squiggle](#)**

Split your days in two. This is pretty easy to do as a remote worker, as you can work from different locations in the morning and afternoon. Having a nice walk or cycle somewhere around lunch gives your mind time to work and your body some movement, which it probably needs if you've been sitting all morning ;)

**Debra Carpenter, PR Manager at [Logo Garden](#)**

Use the little moments of free time throughout the day to your advantage—do some jumping jacks, walk outside, meditate. It helps break my days into smaller, more manageable bits and makes me feel more productive.

**Mike Knoop, Co-Founder of [Zapier](#)**

To me, burn-out is when I have particularly low energy. It's happened a few times. The best way I've found isn't to fight it, or force yourself to work on something productive. Rather, switch gears and do something active for a few hours. Go outside, walk, go do an errand. Seems to help a lot when you finally get back in front of a machine.

**Nicole Geosits, Customer Support at [Acuity Scheduling](#)**

Get outside when it's nice. Do your laundry in between answering emails so you can wholly enjoy your weekends. Enjoy your flexibility that working remotely offers, and pet your cat when you're feeling stressed.



Spencer the cat helps Acuity Schedule's Nicole Geosits take a break.

---

## 5. Make Time for Human Interaction

**John O'Nolan, Founder of [Ghost](#)**

Burnout is always tough, and I think it affects everyone from time to time. One of the hardest things about working remotely is the lack of human contact to provide a moral boost during the difficult periods. Usually burnout is a clear sign for me that it's time to get out of the house and go and spend time with real live people and unwind a little. I consider this an investment in my future productivity, rather than slacking off, which helps justify it (if only to myself).

“One of the hardest things about working remotely is the lack of human contact to provide a moral boost during the difficult periods.” - John O’Nolan, Ghost

### **Laura Gluhanich, Co-Founder of [Signal Camp](#)**

Make sure to get socialization in—and have a crew you can reach out to for advice, support, celebratory high fives and face to face time.

### **Coby Chapple, Product Designer at [Github](#)**

Go talk to another human. Everyone always underestimates how much this helps. The most helpful person to speak to will be different depending on your situation, but here’s some ideas to try: talk to your manager, your colleagues, your non-work friends, and your family. You really should try and cultivate friendships outside your job (and even outside your industry as a whole) if you don’t already. One of the most [helpful things for burnout](#) is a change of context to distract you from your professional life’s fatigue, and healthy social time with friends is unbeatable in terms of grounding you in the bigger picture.

### **Aray Montaivan-Till, Community Manager at [Cloud Peeps](#)**

Go out to lunch or coffee at least once a week with another freelancer [or remote worker] in the area. It’s great to talk shop, vent and talk through problems and thoughts together.

### **Wade Foster, Co-Founder of [Zapier](#)**

One thing I think is really important especially for remote workers is to have a local social life. Have friends, colleagues or family that

you can hangout with. Otherwise you'll get no social interaction ever and will quickly burn out from work even if the work is fun.



Zapier co-founders and friends Wade Foster, Mike Knoop, and Bryan Helmig spend time together outside of work.

---

## Don't Flame Out

Campaign Monitor's Mercer perfectly summed up the working from home life in her answer. "Hobbies are super helpful to distract you from the feeling that because you work from home that home always has to mean work," she says.

Home doesn't always have to mean work, and those other things we love to do in life outside of our work help keep work in one corner of our lives, and let our other interests and hobbies share that same space. If we establish a routine, manage and respect our time, spend time with people outside of work, and take breaks—such as

dedicating time to hobbies (mine is beer making!)—remote working can be an extremely fulfilling way to live. Burnout is something we don't have to let happen if we're mindful and take care of ourselves.

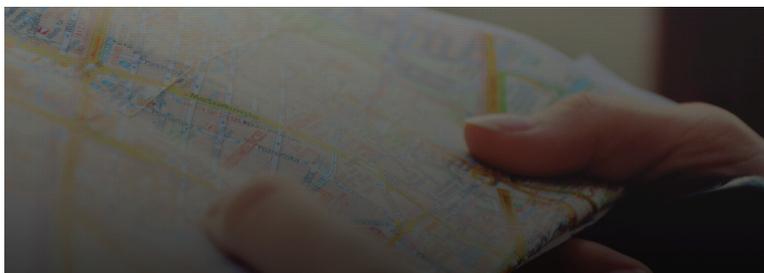
---

*Written by Zapier community manager [Alison Groves](#)*

*Image Credits: Match photo courtesy [Ana via Flickr](#). Remote photos courtesy respective individuals.*

# Chapter 14: A Special Thanks To Those Who Share

The Best Blog Posts, Articles and Resources on Remote Work



We wouldn't have been as successful as we have been at remote working without other people and companies sharing what they've learned along the way. Here are the best posts, books, and other resources about remote working that have inspired and challenged me to think differently.

We'd like to say *Thank you!* to all these people and companies for sharing their experiences and providing a map to help us navigate the challenges of remote working. I hope you'll find these resources helpful as well.

## Automattic

Automattic is most notably the team behind WordPress.com. With over 300 employees, all of which work remotely, they are one of the best modern examples of what a successful remote team looks like.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [A Year Without Pants](#)
- [Why Isn't Remote Work More Popular?](#)
- [10 Lessons from 4 Years Working Remotely](#)
- [Why Remote Work Thrives in Some Companies and Fails in Others](#)

## GitHub

Similar to Automattic, GitHub has helped write the book on what modern remote work looks like. GitHub has almost 300 teammates that work all over the world.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [How GitHub Works](#)

## Basecamp (formerly 37Signals)

Basecamp literally wrote the book on remote work. The best selling book *Remote* is one of the best resources to pick up if you are wanting to build a remote team. Their older book *Rework* also includes a number of helpful tips about remote working and productivity in a distributed workplace, many of which were originally shared in part on their blog, [Signal v. Noise](#).

- [Remote](#)
- [Rework](#)

## Treehouse

Treehouse teaches people how to code, and they are also a remote team of about 100 people. Not only are they remote, but they also do other things that people might think are strange like working a 4 day work week.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [How I Manage 40 People Remotely](#)
- [How to successfully run a remote team](#)
- [How We Hire Developers at Treehouse](#)

## Buffer

Buffer is about 1 year older than us. It's been great to watch their founders, Joel and Leo, grow Buffer, and we get to learn from them since we are so similar in age.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [What Remote Working Means & The Tools We Use at Buffer](#)
- [The Joys and Benefits of Working as a Distributed Team](#)
- [How We Hire at Buffer](#)

## Help Scout

Help Scout is almost exactly the same age as us. As a result we've often struggled with the same things at the same time. It's been great to bounce ideas off each other as we've grown.

*Our favorite posts:*

<http://www.helpscout.net/blog/hiring-employees/> <http://www.helpscout.net/blog/culture/>

## Groove

The Groove blog is one of the best for early stage companies. Alex is also one of the most thoughtful bloggers around, so it's no surprise that their writing on remote teams is helpful too.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [How Our Startup Hires Top Talent Without Bidding Against Google](#)
- [The Best Tips And Tools For Managing A Remote Customer Service Team](#)
- [The Pros & Cons of Being a Remote Team \(& How We Do It\)](#)

## Fogcreek

Fog Creek is famous for having great private offices for developers in NYC. So when they started allowing remote work it was a bit of a surprise. Like most of what they do, their guide to remote work is pretty great though.

- [Fog Creek's Ad Hoc Remote Work Policy, or, Working From Grandma's House](#)

## Stack Exchange

Stack Exchange is founded by two of the most well known engineers, Joel Spolsky and Jeff Atwood. Both are known for their great writing on engineering productivity. So it's no surprise that Stack Exchange has great posts on remote work.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [On Working Remotely](#)
- [Why We Still Believe in Working Remotely](#)

## Wide Teams

Wide Teams hasn't been updated in a while but it's still a great resource. There are over 100 podcast episodes with people who have spent varying amounts of time with remote teams. It's worth checking out.

- [Wide Teams](#)

## WooThemes

WooThemes has grown as an international remote team. And one of their founders, Adii Pienaar, is a fantastic writer and shared some great articles on remote work.

*Our favorite posts:*

- [Trust In People](#)
- [The Challenge of Remote Working](#)

## Popforms

Team building is one of those tough things to do in remote teams. Kate Stull was kind enough to share how Popforms makes this work.

- [Team-building for remote teams: how the best remote teams function, build trust, and get things done](#)

## Scott Hanselman

As great as remote working can be, sometimes it can really suck. Scott Hanselman has worked remotely for 5 years for Microsoft and shares how to make it suck a little less.

- [Being a Remote Worker Sucks - Long Live the Remote Worker](#)

## Steven Sinofsky

Steven Sinofsky is a board partner at Andreessen Horowitz, but prior to that he spent many years at Microsoft. This post is one of the better posts at breaking down exactly what makes remote work so darn hard.

- [Why Remote Engineering Is So Difficult!?!#@%](#)

## StatusPages

Remote work isn't for everyone. The team at StatusPages gave it a try and they hated it. Here's why.

- [We Tried Building a Remote Team and it Sucked](#)

## iDoneThis

The iDoneThis blog is one of the best blogs out there on management. This post digs into remote team communication and how to make it work.

- [Remote Team Communication](#)

## HubSpot

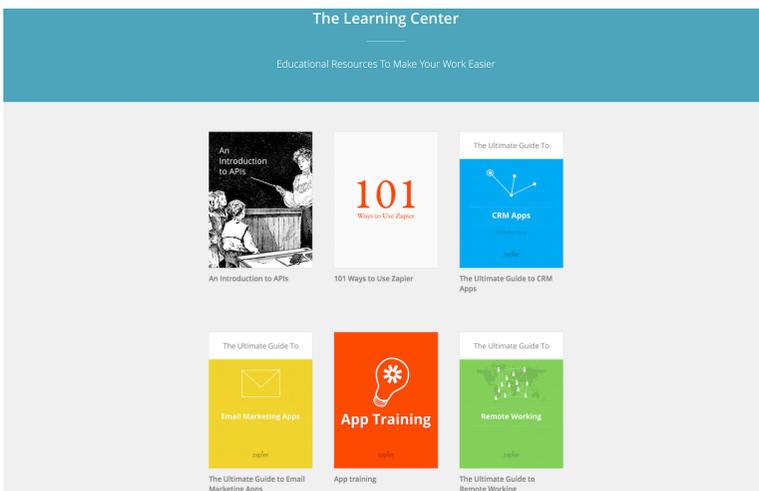
HubSpot publishes roughly 15 posts a day across their blog. With so much content, they rely on a fleet of guest contributors, freelancers and other remote writers. Here's how they pull it off.

- [How to Build and Manage a Team of Remote Writers](#)

## Remotive.io

Staying on top of current trends in remote working isn't something you have to do by yourself. Remotive is a great newsletter that will bring all the best content on remote work to you.

- [Remotive](#)



Enjoy this book? Check out the other books and guides from the Zapier book at [Zapier.com/learn](https://zapier.com/learn), or follow along on our blog at [Zapier.com/blog](https://zapier.com/blog)

---

*Written by Wade Foster*

*Image Credits: Map photo by [Sylwia Bartyzel](#) via [Unsplash](#)*