

REMOTE, INC.

HOW TO THRIVE AT WORK . . .
WHEREVER YOU ARE

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HARPER
BUSINESS

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From Chapter 2: Your Business of One

DOING YOUR BEST WORK AS A BUSINESS OF ONE

If you experience remote work as an endless series of Zoom calls, email messages, and Slack notifications, it may be very hard for you to deliver great results. Your aim is to find the sweet spot between structure and flexibility that allows you to . . .

- Work during the times when you're most productive
- Collaborate effectively with teammates
- Deliver good results to your boss, customers, or clients
- Regularly relax and regenerate—not only so that you can work productively, but also because you deserve to have a life!

For many remote workers, and especially for developing employees, it can be hard to find this kind of balance. That's because many remote teams operate the way they would at the office, treating meetings as the default form of collaboration, and collaboration as the norm for how work gets done. But these are the very assumptions we need to change when we start working remotely.

The focus on real-time collaboration through meetings made a lot of sense fifty years ago, when it was the most efficient way to exchange ideas. Just think about the alternative: Sit down at your IBM Selectric typewriter (or ask your secretary to type up your notes); Wite-Out your errors; distribute carbon copies or photocopies. Put it in the *mail* and then wait a week to hear back, in the form of someone else's typed-up, Wited-Out, carbon-copied document. What a nightmare!

Seriously, how did anyone do anything back then? Well, through meetings, of course: just get everyone in a room, hash things through, and then it takes only one secretary and one typewriter to get to a final document.

Thankfully those days are now behind us. And yet we often work as if we

face the same constraints—even though electronic communication means we can now collaborate across distances, and revise or iterate in close to real time.

Punctuated Collaboration

A smarter model is what we call “punctuated collaboration”: an approach that finds a middle ground between the efficiency of solo work and the many benefits of collaboration. Working as a team engages diversity of perspectives and knowledge, builds trust and relationship among colleagues, and builds consensus and buy-in around the outcome. Even if you *could* write a better report entirely on your own, collaboration is the best way to rally your teammates around the result.

The secret is to make collaboration specific, focused, and time-limited, rather than accepting it as our default mode for getting work done.² When you work in an office, collaboration may indeed be the most effective option, but in part that’s because it’s so hard to do focused work when you’re constantly interrupted. Once you shift to working from home, you can make the most of solo time, and then use focused check-ins to advance your project or deliverable to the next stage.

You will be most effective at shifting the balance of work from collaboration to solo work if you can propose specific plans that get your team to the finish line with fewer meetings and better results. Here are some common scenarios in which distributed teams default to meetings, but where you can suggest punctuated collaboration: that is, distributing tasks among the team so that people can get more done on their own, with check-ins at specific intervals and with clear success metrics.

INSTEAD OF DAILY MEETINGS TO PLAN YOUR CORPORATE RETREAT . . .

1. Start by creating a project plan that delineates all the tasks involved in organizing the retreat; then group these based on roles or where different people excel.

2. Next, use an online project dashboard to assign tasks and request regular updates on progress toward each task.
3. Ask each person to maintain a separate list of questions/items for discussion by the whole team.
4. Assign a project manager to track progress on each task against deadline and collect questions for team discussion as the basis for meeting agendas. Any questions that require input from only one or two people go to those people via message or email.
5. Post updates on the project dashboard so everyone can see status and key info in one place.
6. Reserve weekly calls for discussing items that actually require group input or decision-making.

INSTEAD OF A SERIES OF CALLS TO BRAINSTORM NEW PRODUCT OR CAMPAIGN IDEAS . . .

1. Set up a standing suggestion box (for example, an online form, Google Doc, or wiki) where team members can collect ideas for the next product or campaign, with every idea attributed to its source. (Credit is one reason people save their ideas for meetings.) An online suggestion box also creates room for less vocal employees.
2. Dig into the suggestion box when it's time to start a new initiative: the project lead collects existing ideas or solicits new ones, which they compile or categorize in an online document (like a Google Doc or spreadsheet).
3. Invite team members to comment on the ideas in the initial brainstorming file, and add other ideas that are inspired by the starting point.

4. Review the document to identify the most promising ideas, and then convene the team to review the top ideas and arrive at a list of top options over the course of two or three virtual meetings.

INSTEAD OF DAILY WORK SPRINTS AS A TEAM . . .

1. Set team goals for the week, month, or product cycle.
2. Schedule manager check-ins at key points in the process—with deadlines and decision points for each meeting.
3. Set up a drop-in virtual meeting room, coworking message channel, phone call, or playlist for team members who like the feeling of ambient collegiality—but make this optional, so people drop in to the coworking space only if they actively want to be there.
4. Empower individual team members to work in pairs or small groups as needed, rather than convening the entire team.

In some organizations, these strategies of punctuated collaboration are already the norm. But there are many teams that spend the majority of their day on video calls, just because they're in the habit of managing by meeting; such meetings often include many agenda items that don't actually require every single person on the call. These are the teams that need to adapt their remote work strategies so that people mainly work solo or in pairs, and group or team calls are scheduled only when they're really necessary.

MAKING THE CASE FOR *REMOTE, INC.*

Encouraging Punctuated Collaboration

It can be very hard to avoid the expectations of your boss or colleagues that you will participate in many online meetings, even though

they are probably feeling overloaded by meetings themselves. So you need to model the idea of punctuated collaboration in your own projects, and make a point of explicitly reflecting on its benefits.

At the start of a project where you are the team leader or project manager, use the kick-off meeting to assign initial tasks, and let the team know you'll aim to minimize meetings by asking each person to get more done on their own. Introduce them to the project dashboard and be religious about keeping it up-to-date. At the beginning and end of your (less frequent) project meetings, note that you were able to keep this meeting short (or skip the previous week's meeting) because everyone has been making such good use of punctuated collaboration.

This strategy can work even if you're very junior: Just pick a small "project" where you can replace meeting time with email or messaging. For example, instead of taking up meeting time by getting ideas for the group social you need to organize, let everyone know that you'd like to give them back the next thirty minutes by getting suggestions through email instead; then you'll present a short list of options next week.

Once you shift the balance of your workday to involve less collaboration and more solo work, you'll have a lot more control over your schedule and activities. You'll be able to focus on results instead of hours worked, and concentrate your efforts on the work that matters most.

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