



A COMPLETE GUIDE TO DIGITAL COMMUNICATION **FOR REMOTE TEAMS**



How to Best Implement
Synchronous and Asynchronous
Communication for Maximum
Productivity and Efficiency

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INTRODUCTION

Remote work is a growing trend that has become a permanent reality for many due to improvements in technology and global events. In May 2020, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey announced that employees would be able to continue to work from home even after coronavirus restrictions were lifted. And many other companies — Upwork, Shopify, Coinbase — are following suit by transitioning from an in-office work environment to one that is digital and geographically distributed.

There are two major reasons for this shift. The first is that **remote work is good for business**. Studies have shown that remote work increases employee productivity, improves retention rates, and reduces costs (avg. \$10,000 on real estate expenses). The second is that people want to work from home. Therefore, companies that provide remote work options are able to attract better talent.

According to **Global Workplace Analytics**, 77% of people want to continue to work from home after the coronavirus pandemic is over, and 25 - 30% of people will be working remotely multiple days per week by the end of 2021. But whether or not remote work is the future of business has yet to be seen.

There are definite challenges to working remotely. The biggest challenge is the loss of human connection. Are people able to work away from their peers for a prolonged period of time and still remain healthy and productive? We don't know.

As we run a global experiment on whether or not remote work can become the new norm, the focus sharpens on how to improve processes to increase the productivity and efficiency of remote, distributed teams. And effective communication is at the forefront of these discussions.

The ability to communicate effectively makes or breaks the success of a team. Every business must have a strong communication infrastructure in place to grow and prosper. But the communication needs of a geographically distributed, digitally connected team are very different from that of a team in an in-office work environment.

This is why we created this guide, with practical knowledge and wisdom on digital communication for remote teams based on our own experience as an internationally distributed, remote working team of 50+ employees.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for organizations and team members who are or are planning to work remotely as a distributed team. It is a complete guide to digital communication for remote teams divided into two parts: asynchronous communication and synchronous communication. The first part which you are about to read focuses on asynchronous communication — what it is, its benefits and challenges, and how to best implement it in your team for positive results.

After reading this guide, you will have a clear and practical understanding of communication best practices for remote teams to better navigate the wonders and pitfalls of working remotely as a distributed team.

1

YOUR GUIDE TO **ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION** IN REMOTE WORK



“There is a time and a place for everything, including synchronous and asynchronous communication while working remotely.”

What is **asynchronous communication?**

Asynchronous communication is communication that does not happen in real time. It is email, or notes posted to an online bulletin. This is different from synchronous communication, or communication that does happen in real time like a face-to-face meeting, company meeting on Zoom, or an active chat room.

In other words, asynchronous communication happens when you send a message with no expectations for an immediate response. Synchronous communication happens when you send a message and the recipient processes the information and provides an immediate response.

Common examples of **asynchronous communication** include:

Email

You send an email but may not get a response until hours or days later.

Wiki

You create articles in a wiki which are accessed by others at a later date.

Discussion Forums

You write posts and / or comments in a discussion forum that others respond to on their own time.

Task Management Systems

You create action items with details provided on what needs to be accomplished, which team members may discuss with you if desired.

Chat

This can be synchronous or asynchronous depending on company culture, but you may leave messages in a chat room with no expectations for an immediate response.

Why is asynchronous communication **important for remote teams?**

There is a time and a place for everything, including synchronous and asynchronous communication while working remotely. The truth is - the best remote working teams implement a balanced combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication. This is because what doesn't need to be synchronous is better accomplished asynchronously.

When used correctly and **at the right ratios**, asynchronous communication's benefits include:

Necessity and Benefits of Time Flexibility

Being flexible about when responses are expected of others is essential for a geographically distributed team where people are working in different time zones. Not only that, having more control over work hours results in happier and more productive people. Asynchronous communication allows employees to structure workdays to fit their lifestyles and responsibilities.

Encouragement of Diversity

Some people are better at synchronous communication while others are better at asynchronous communication. And a team composed of people of people with varying skill sets is better than a team where everyone only knows how to do the same thing.

Higher Quality Communication

Because it is slower, asynchronous communication provides the time and space necessary to think through and provide high quality responses. For example, more time and thought are put into writing an email consisting of a couple of paragraphs than a one-line chat message. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos takes this one step further in his staff meetings, in which he combines both asynchronous and synchronous communication. No PowerPoints are used in Amazon meetings. Instead, people must prepare multi-page, narratively structured memos which go through a thorough revision process with co-workers before the actual meeting. Then, the first part of the meeting is spent in silence reading through each memo. Only after this asynchronous communication process is complete does the synchronous part of the meeting begin.

How to Best Implement **Asynchronous Communication** in a Remote Team

Now that we've established what asynchronous communication is and why it is important, it's time to talk about how to best implement it in your team. The next part of this section consists of best practices to follow when it comes to balancing synchronous and asynchronous communication and using asynchronous communication in the remote workplace.



“Make sure everyone is on the same page in terms of what app to use for which tasks. People need to know what goes where.”

Group Communication by Context

In a face-to-face meeting, it's easy to ask a question and get an immediate answer if you are confused or need more information to move forward with work. With async communication, that is not the case. That is why context and organization of information is even more important than usual. Properly organizing your async communications reduces confusion, increases productivity and efficiency, and creates a clear record of information.

The other benefit of organizing communication by context is that if you bring a new person into the company or project, it will be easy for them to read through the necessary materials and get caught up with less hand-holding. This makes work easier for everyone involved.

So how do you maximize organization of your team's async communication?

There are three main action steps to take.

First, make sure everyone is on the same page in terms of what app to use for which tasks.

People need to know where things go. Team members should be clear on where to post status reports, task items, brainstorm sessions, work drafts etc.

Second, make sure you take, organize, and store information in a way that newcomers are able to easily access the information and get a clear understanding of what's going on in a single day.

This means choosing the right modes of async communication for your team and the right technology to implement those modes.

Third, pay attention to the public vs. private message ratio of your chat groups.

This applies whether chat is sync or async for you (as mentioned before, this depends on company culture). But finding a good balance here is important. Too much private, 1-1 messaging can be a sign of cliques, which are roadblocks to productivity. Too much public, large group messaging can be distracting and prevent the completion of deep work.

Decide on Your Asynchronous Communication Modes

First, consider the modes of communication you want to use.

The basic async communication modes you want to consider for your team are as follows:

Wiki

A place to make and keep notes containing everything from full article drafts to async brainstorming sessions.

Task Management

A good tool for communicating async status updates, action assignments, and even in-progress notes.

Discussion Forum

A great place for teams to post status updates and share long-form ideas.

Email

Everyone has it; everyone uses it. So, we're not going to say much about this one or even recommend apps for it. Whatever you're already using probably works just fine.

Use the **Right Technology**

Having the right technology infrastructure in place is essential for success as a remote, distributed team.

If you think about it, since there is no physical office — the technology is the office. Your computer becomes your cubicle, your chat app becomes the hallway taking you to your team members' desks to talk, your video conferencing app becomes the conference room. So, a remote team having the right technology in place is as important as an in-office team having a functional, comfortable office to work in.

So how do you choose **the right technology** for you?

After you've decided on the modes, you can choose your apps accordingly. There are a lot of apps out there. Here are a few of our favorites for asynchronous communication:

AirSend

AirSend is an all-in-one app that allows you to send messages, share and organize files, complete tasks, have video or screen sharing calls, and keep notes in a built-in wiki. The wiki and task management sections provide everything you need for asynchronous communication. While the messaging and conferencing capabilities fulfill your team's synchronous communication needs. We use AirSend for almost all of our team's communication, sync and async.

Trello

Trello is a task management tool that is great for assigning and keeping track of tasks. Inspired by Kanban, Trello allows you to create unlimited boards, lists, and cards so that you can sort and customize your to-do lists any way you want. The app can be used to provide asynchronous status updates and to organize discussions during synchronous meetings.

Discourse

Discourse is an app that lets you create your own online discussion forum. Discussion forums are great because they allow you to write long-form content and organize that content by topic.

This brings us to our other option
for remote communication.



2

YOUR GUIDE TO **SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION** IN REMOTE WORK



“Meeting with someone instantly feels more personal than sending an email. That is why certain scenarios require synchronous communication over asynchronous communication.”

What is **synchronous communication**?

As mentioned before, synchronous communication is communication that happens in real time. Like a face-to-face meeting, a company meeting on Zoom, or an active chat room. Synchronous communication happens when you send a message and the recipient processes the information and provides an immediate response.

Common examples of synchronous communication include:

In-person Meetings

In-person meetings are the most direct form of synchronous communication. You're meeting face-to-face, interacting in real-time, and immediate responses are both expected and given, whether those responses are verbal or non-verbal (body language).

Video Conferencing / Screen-sharing

When working remotely, online video meetings may be more common than in-person meetings. Video conferencing enables synchronous communication for the same reasons that in-person meetings facilitate synchronous communication.

Voice Conferencing

Just like in-person meetings or video conferencing, voice conferencing is synchronous because you are having a conversation in real-time with immediate responses, just without the visual element.

Chat

This can be synchronous or asynchronous depending on company culture, but chat communication is often synchronous because, as the term "instant messaging" implies, people expect and provide instant messages or responses.

Why is synchronous communication **important for remote teams?**

As mentioned before, the best remote teams implement a balanced combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication.

When used correctly and at the right ratios, synchronous communication offers the **following benefits:**

Easier Collaboration

Synchronous communication is necessary for work that requires close collaboration. This is because team members can provide immediate feedback, which smooths the collaboration process. Other activities that synchronous communication is well-suited for are brainstorming sessions and coordinating meetings or other events. If you've ever experienced the frustration of trying to coordinate a meeting through email, you'll know what we mean.

Increased Camaraderie

Synchronous communication is also better for building relationships. Meeting with someone instantly feels more personal than sending an email. That is why certain scenarios require synchronous communication over asynchronous communication, such as situations where important feedback is being provided or situations where the goal is to increase team member closeness and morale.

Now that we've talked about the benefits of synchronous communication, let's discuss the dangers of requiring too much of it.

If your remote team culture requires members be available and connected the entire work day, you reduce their ability to do good work and increase the possibility of burnout. This is because too much of an emphasis on synchronous communication prioritizes connection over productivity and speed over quality.

Too much synchronous communication has the following consequences:

Lower Productivity Because of Too Many Interruptions

We've all experienced this at one point whether it be in an office environment or in a remote work situation. In the office, it's dealing with that coworker who talks to you every time they pass by your desk for a coffee break, and who takes three coffee breaks every hour. In a remote work situation, it's being bombarded with chat messages every minute. Either way, the interruptions make it harder to focus on the work at hand and decrease your overall productivity.

Unnecessary Stress Leading to Burnout

Lower productivity leads to the need to work longer hours or work faster. And the need to work for longer to complete work in a speedier manner creates stress, which can lead to burnout.

Lower Quality Discussions and Work

The final downside to an overabundance of synchronous communication is that the pressure to respond quickly results in lower quality discussions because there is no time to refine ideas. And lower quality discussions become lower quality work in the long run.

As you can see, too much synchronous communication results in a negative cascade of cause and effect. That is why we recommend you find the right balance between synchronous and asynchronous communication instead of favoring one over the other.

How to Best Implement **Synchronous Communication** in a Remote Team

Now that we've established what synchronous communication is as well as its benefits and pitfalls. Now it's time to talk about how to best implement it in your team. The next part of this section consists of best practices to follow when it comes to balancing synchronous and asynchronous communication and using synchronous communication with your remote team.



“A wire-connected headphone is best because bluetooth has some latency, but at minimum you should use something like AirPods.”

Have **Face-to-Face Time**

Including face-to-face time in your remote work communication routine is important for team cohesion and morale. It's easy to feel disconnected when you're not going to the office every day, and video calls and company or department-wide retreats will help combat the sense of isolation that team members might feel. Meeting people face-to-face or, better yet, in person forms healthy bonds between team members and helps people put faces to names in the largely digital environment of a remote workplace.

The amount of video calling and retreats that you do will depend on your company culture and capabilities, but having at least one video call every week and organizing a retreat once or twice per year is a good baseline.

It's also important to have 1-1 calls between team leaders and team members every week. This helps the team feel more personally connected and keeps everyone on the same page in terms of work tasks and progress.

Encourage **Chat Best Practices**

In a remote work environment, chat makes up the majority of the communication, so it's important that your team understands chat best practices to reduce noise and confusion and increase productivity.

As mentioned before in the Asynchronous Communication section of this guide, grouping communication by context is essential. This applies whether chat is sync or async for you (as mentioned before, this depends on company culture).

Some **chat best practices** for grouping communication by context are as follows:

Post in the correct channels or chat rooms to maintain communication traffic.

Too much private, 1-1 messaging can be a sign of cliques, which are roadblocks to productivity. Your team ends up lacking context if most discussions happen privately, and catching people up takes additional time and effort. On the other hand, too much public, large group messaging can be distracting and prevent the completion of deep work. Finding a good balance here is an art and may take some experimentation, but a typical ratio to keep in mind is 30% private conversation and 70% public discussion.

Use tags to notify importance and use them judiciously and maintain context with quotes.

Once you're in the right channel or chat room, using tags such as @name and quoting other people when you are responding directly to them helps to maintain and strengthen context. This is only necessary in group messaging and not necessary for 1-1 chats.

Consolidate messages for efficient communication.

Another best practice for strengthening context and reducing confusion is putting everything that you want to say on a given topic into a single paragraph of text instead of sending several one-line messages in a row.

Minimize extensive conversations with voice or video calls.

Finally, if something feels too long to communicate over chat, use a voice or video call instead.



Establish **Audio and Video Call Guidelines**

Although chat will make up the majority of your remote work communication, some things are difficult or too tedious to explain in a text conversation. That is when it's good to have an audio or video call.

Audio-only or Video and Audio?

A frequent conundrum during remote work is whether or not a call should include video or be audio-only. Here are some good questions to ask to resolve any confusion.

Is it a company-wide or department-wide call?

If yes, using video is good to gain the benefits of face-to-face time such as increased team cohesion and moral.

Is the call pre-scheduled or impromptu?

Generally speaking, you only want to use video for pre-scheduled calls.

That way team members do not feel the need to make themselves visually presentable every day when it may not be necessary.

What is your audio to video call ratio?

How many of your calls are audio and how many are video? A good rule of thumb is to have 80% audio calls and 20% video calls for maximum productivity and bonding.

AUDIO OR VIDEO?



Some other **audio and video call tips** include:

Don't be afraid to share your screen.

Screen sharing is very helpful when collaborating on projects and discussing ideas. Encourage your team to use this function frequently to add a helpful visual element to your audio-only calls.

Audio is more important than video.

Blurry video is tolerable as long as your audio quality is good (clear, lag-free, and continuous). However, it's still good to invest in the right technology for improved video quality once your internet connection and audio set-up are good to go.

Use headphones.

The easiest way to get great audio quality is to use headphones with a microphone that's near your mouth. Wire-connected headphones are best because bluetooth has some latency, but at minimum you should use something like AirPods. When you use headphones, the audio plays into your ear, so your mic won't pick up other peoples' voices. And a microphone near your mouth will pick up your voice so that you get heard as well.

Use the **Right Technology**

As we mentioned before, having the right technology infrastructure in place is essential for success as a remote, distributed team. For synchronous communication, you will need a way to conduct audio and video calls, chat, and take and save meeting notes. You may also want to include a task management app so that you can review and assign tasks in an organized way during meetings.

There are a lot of apps out there, but **here are our favorites**

AirSend

AirSend is an all-in-one app that allows you to send messages, share and organize files, complete tasks, have video or screen sharing calls, and keep notes in a built-in wiki. The messaging, voice and video calling and screen-sharing capabilities fully satisfy your team's synchronous communication needs. And the built-in wiki and task management functions provide everything you need to take notes and organize tasks during meetings. We use AirSend for almost all of our team's communication.

Zoom

Zoom is the golden standard when it comes to audio and video calling. In our experience, it's best for large conference calls with more people (we use it for our bi-weekly company-wide video conferences). It's also a good way to conduct team building activities remotely like playing Jackbox games. Because the Zoom client pops up every time you join a meeting and is slower than other options, we don't like it for impromptu 1-1 meetings as the time wasted waiting for the client to load can be irritating.

Skype

Unlike Zoom, Skype is great for 1-1 meetings. It's also nice because you can use it to call phones if you need to, and the chat is permanently connected to your contacts and available. The only negative about Skype is that its audio and video quality can be lacking compared to AirSend and Zoom.

3

GENERAL BEST PRACTICES FOR REMOTE WORK COMMUNICATION



“Once you have a clear communication framework and a team composed of the right people, it’s important to have a clear set of guidelines on what is expected of your team members.”

Now that we've gone over all of the basics that you need to know about synchronous and asynchronous communication, here are some general best practices for remote work communication to tie it all together.

Incentivize **Clear Communication**

Rewarding clear, legible communication through frequent feedback is a good way to keep everyone on the right track. An example of this would be requiring detailed weekly activity reports and responding to those reports with good feedback.

Have **Core Working Hours**

Your ability to implement core working hours depends on the geographical placement of members and team lead preferences. However, if possible, a core working hours policy where everyone is expected to be online and working for around 3 to 4 hours every weekday allows for a good balance of synchronous and asynchronous communication.

With core working hours, there is enough time for necessary real-time discussions. You also still get the asynchronous communication benefits of schedule flexibility and the ability to engage in deep work.

Deep work is focusing on a cognitively demanding task without distractions. It lets people quickly process complex information and produce higher quality results in less time. Examples of deep work include:

- Writing an article
- Researching a topic
- Analyzing data and creating a report

Increasing team members' ability to do deep work is important in boosting the overall productivity of your organization. Core working hours make sure your team has time to be connected through synchronous communication and time to engage in asynchronous communication and do deep work.

Set the **Right Expectations**

Once you have a clear communication framework and a team composed of the right people, it's important to have a clear set of guidelines on what is expected of your team members. This is important for both in-person and remote teams, but particularly so for remote teams where there is less supervision and ability to give and receive immediate feedback.

There are innumerable books on how to manage people, so we're not going to go into detail here. Just keep in mind that setting healthy expectations and being clear on company policies on communication (and everything else) is essential!

Something that can help with this is having a section dedicated to remote work communication best practices in your employee handbook or having an entire, separate training and guidebook on communication available to team members. Asynchronous and even synchronous communication in remote work, unlike synchronous communication that happens in-person, may not be as intuitive. So, it's good to have written guidelines available for team members and new hires so that everyone is on the same page.

Hire the **Right People**

Not everyone is a good fit when it comes to a remote working, distributed situation. Remote work places an emphasis on certain skills and attributes that may not be as important in an in-person office environment.

For example, because the amount of face-to-face, spoken communication is reduced when working remotely, writing skills become very important. The ability to communicate clearly through writing, whether that be writing in a chat app or writing a multi-page report, is necessary for a good remote worker.

So, when you are hiring for your remote team, make sure the candidates are good writers.

Some other **things to look for** are:

- *Evidence of discipline and self-motivation*
- *Pre-existing remote work experience*
- *Ability to focus on the job at hand (avoid side-hustlers)*

Some **red flags** are:

Evidence of anti-social / loner behavior.

Remote work positions can attract people who want to be as isolated as possible. Loners may work well for specific positions that don't require much collaboration, but generally speaking they are difficult to work with and not a good fit.

Experience in only highly supervised roles.

You need someone who can get work done without having the feeling of being watched or constantly nagged. This is why hiring someone with pre-existing remote work experience is ideal.

Evidence of lack of focus, or the side-hustler.

Remote work listings can attract people who are looking to start their own thing but still need a pay-check, or people who engage in many gigs / side-hustles at one time. Make sure the person you are hiring is planning to dedicate enough time, energy, and focus to the job.



Remote Work Communication Checklist

Since we've given you a mountain of information to digest, here is a checklist to help you quickly and easily improve or create your remote work communication framework.

We recommend sitting down with your laptop or a sheet of paper and writing down your answers to the below questions. Your answers to these questions will create a complete remote work communication framework for you and your team so you can either start off on the right foot or optimize your pre-existing set-up.

Asynchronous Communication

- What modes of async communication are you planning on using? (Email, Wiki, Discussion Forum, Task Management)
- What tool or app are you using for each mode?
- Is it clear to your team members which app to use for what modes and topics? Do you have a handbook, or do you need to create one to make this clear?

Synchronous Communication

How much face-to-face time do you have scheduled for your team?

- Will you do in-person company retreats? If so, how many times per year?
- What tool or apps are you using for chat, audio and video calling, note taking, and task tracking?
- What is your approximate public vs. private message ratio in your chat app? Is it working well, or do you need to adjust?
- What is your current video to voice call ratio? Is it working well, or do you need to adjust?
- Have you provided clear guidelines to team members about chat and video/voice calling?

Other

- What are your core working hours (hours each workday when everyone is required to be online and available)?
- Are all of your team members meeting or exceeding expectations when it comes to communication and collaboration? Or do you need to adjust with training or hiring?
- Do you have a clear set of written communication policies available to your team?

CONCLUSION

As a result of technological advances and global events, remote work is becoming a permanent reality for many people. The ability to effectively communicate and collaborate is the most important factor for a successful team, and the tools and skills needed for communication in remote work are different than those of an in-office environment.

We hope that this guide will help you and your team find the right communication tools and policies for you to thrive as a remote work, distributed company.



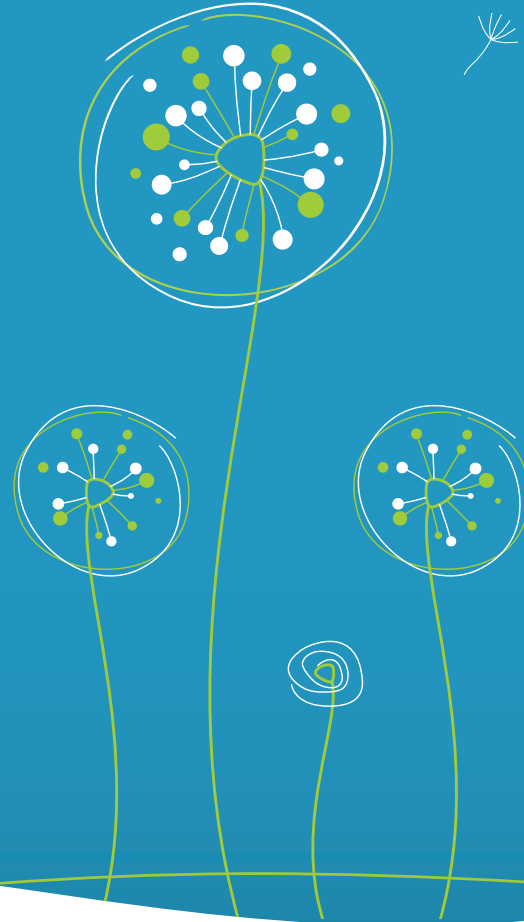
About

AirSend began as a desire to make a revolutionary new product that would bring transformative benefits to millions of people.

As a company with an award-winning product in enterprise file sharing, we knew that every good solution begins with a worthy problem.

With AirSend, we built a contextual workspace that brings all your conversations, files, notes, and to-do lists into one place so that you can get work done better and faster.

This workspace will save millions of hours for professionals who work with clients, improve their focus and quality of life, and help them get work done faster and more easily.

The illustration features four stylized dandelions with thin green stems. The heads of the dandelions are circular and contain a network of white and yellow dots connected by thin lines, resembling a data or communication network. The background is a solid blue color with several white dandelion seed heads scattered in the upper right quadrant. A white wavy line at the bottom of the blue area separates it from the white footer area.

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www.airsend.io