

Dealing
with the
causes
of stress
in remote
teams

Human
Made.

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About the Author



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About Human Made



Human Made is an enterprise-level WordPress development agency. Our clients include NewsUK, USA Today, Airbnb, Standard Chartered, Unison, Greenpeace, and ustwo. We're the people behind [Nomadbase](#), [BackupWP](#), and [Happytables](#), and we organise [A Day of REST](#) and [Out of Office](#).

We are a distributed team of more 40 people and growing. Spread across the world, we are based in countries like New Zealand, the UK, Indonesia, Egypt, Bulgaria, Australia, the Netherlands, and the USA.

Staff at Human Made cover the spectrum of remote workers: we work from coffee shops and co-working spaces, from airports, trains, and beaches, from our desks and from our sofas. We are working parents and digital nomads, traveling the world or staying at home, whatever suits us best. What unites us is a genuine inquisitiveness about how we work, how it affects the company, and how it affects us as individuals.

We'd love to hear from you:
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Executive Summary

Remote work has significant benefits to both companies and employees. Companies see an increase in productivity and a reduction in office costs. Employees value the reduced commuting time, the opportunity to spend more time at home, and the potential for improvements in work-life balance., as remote working has grown in popularity, and more and more companies have become fully distributed, there is a growing body of research into remote work.

Research continues to show positive benefits to working remotely, but there are also emergent causes of stress that are unique to remote workers. While factors such as increased flexibility and home-working may reduce some causes of stress, they introduce new stressors that we are only coming to understand more fully. These include challenges brought about by spatial and temporal distance, by cultural and language distance, by electronic dependence, work overload, and work-family conflict.

In this whitepaper we discuss some of the major causes of stress among remote workers, bringing together some of the recent research on remote teams and sharing what we've learned as a fully remote company. We hope it will be useful to both managers of remote teams and individuals who are working in a distributed manner.

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What is a remote team?

A remote, or distributed, team, is a team of distant workers who collaborate towards a common goal. One feature that distinguishes remote teams from traditional telecommuters is that members of a remote team are interdependent on each other, working on the same projects and goals across different timezones and locales.

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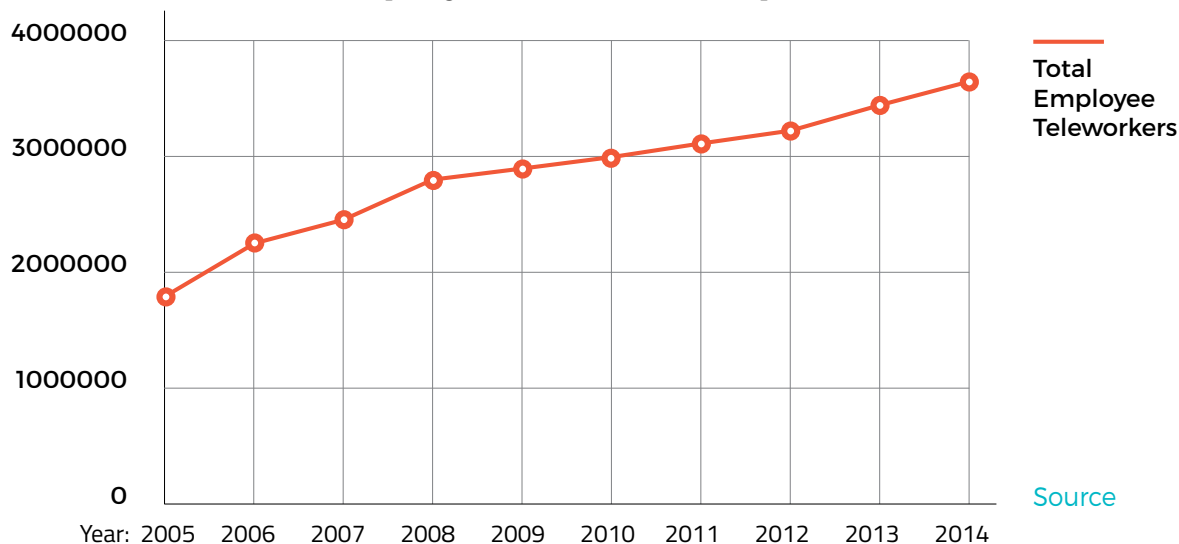
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Total US Employee Teleworkers per Year



A remote team relies on communication technology to function: this could be email, intranet, video or audio conferencing software, blogs, chat clients, messaging services, or a combination of all of these. By relying heavily on communication technology, a remote team can be always-on, always at work, with people in different timezones using asynchronous communication to get work done.

Teams can be distributed to various degrees. Some companies are fully distributed, with no "head office" to speak of; others may have a group of offices scattered around the world; others again may have some employees in offices with others being fully remote.

What is stress?

Stress is an individual's response to a stressor. A stressor in the workplace could be an environmental condition such as another person or the work an individual faces; when they are stressed they are reacting to this challenge. Stress can be positive, leaving a person feeling challenged or invigorated. But it is often negative, causing feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and may lead to burn-out.

There many reasons that an individual can experience negative stress in the workplace, all of which can affect remote teams as much as those in traditional workplaces.

They include:

- ▶ the inability of an individual to deal with specific types of stress in their environment
- ▶ when there is a mismatch between a person's skills and the demands placed on them
- ▶ when there is a mismatch between a person's needs and the resources available to them
- ▶ when a person has no periods without immediate tasks during which they can recuperate and stockpile for future periods of work
- ▶ when an individual faces uncertainty and lacks sufficient cues to predict an outcome
- ▶ when a person's role and responsibilities are ambiguous
- ▶ when a person isn't motivated or challenged by their job
- ▶ when a person puts in high effort for low reward or outcome.

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Stress in remote teams

Just like anyone else, members of a remote team can experience the negative effects of stress. Many [studies into telecommuting](#) have focused on the positive benefits to working from home, including increased flexibility, reduction in commuting, reduced overhead for employers, increased productivity and performance, and less work related stress.

However, a growing body of research is identifying causes of stress unique to remote workers. These include social isolation, blurring of boundaries between work and home, low awareness of location conditions, over and under-communication, language challenges and misunderstandings, lack of support, scheduling difficulties, lack of career progression, more home-related stress, and less influence over people and events in the workplace.

In a traditional co-located workplace many of these stressors would be mitigated by the proximity of team members, who are both able to communicate with one another spontaneously and provide a stable social support network. In remote teams, much of the responsibility for addressing the causes of stress is shifted from the team level to the individual level. It is our hope with this whitepaper to alert managers, team leads, and team members to the causes of stress in remote workers so that better support can be provided.

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Causes of stress in remote teams

Ranking of general challenges faced by virtual teams

1. Time zones
2. Colleagues who do not participate
3. Pace of decision making
4. Understanding of different accents
5. Time required to reach decisions
6. Different role expectations held by each team member
7. Follow-through of team members
8. Sharing bad news
9. Cultural differences
10. Presenting ideas during meetings
11. Adhering to an agenda

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Source: RW3

Spatial distance

Low awareness of local conditions

The defining factor of a remote team is that members are geographically distributed. In many cases they rarely share the same location. This spatial distance means that workers often don't have an awareness of what is happening at another person's locale. The team is only aware of what individuals themselves choose to share with the rest of the team, which means that many of

Without the awareness of other team members' local conditions, people automatically assumed their way of thinking, or their way of doing things, was the only way or the "right" way and did not understand others' points of view.

Nurmi, 2010

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the nuances of day-to-day life are lost. Without the appropriate cues, it can be difficult to predict how another team member will respond. This is further complicated by the different work cultures and communication styles in different locations. All of this can lead to misunderstandings and uncertainty.

Isolation

Numerous studies have found that workers with a high level of social support experience fewer negative stress symptoms. Because of the distance in distributed teams there is less opportunity to give and receive social support, and many remote workers suffer from feelings of isolation and loneliness. The [2015 PGI Global Telework Survey](#) cites alienation and a feeling of disconnect as the perceived top negative aspect of working remotely, among both remote workers and people who don't yet work remotely.

Managers at all levels should find ways to support virtual employees and to create a culture in which co-workers support virtual workers.

Wiesenfeld et. al. 2001

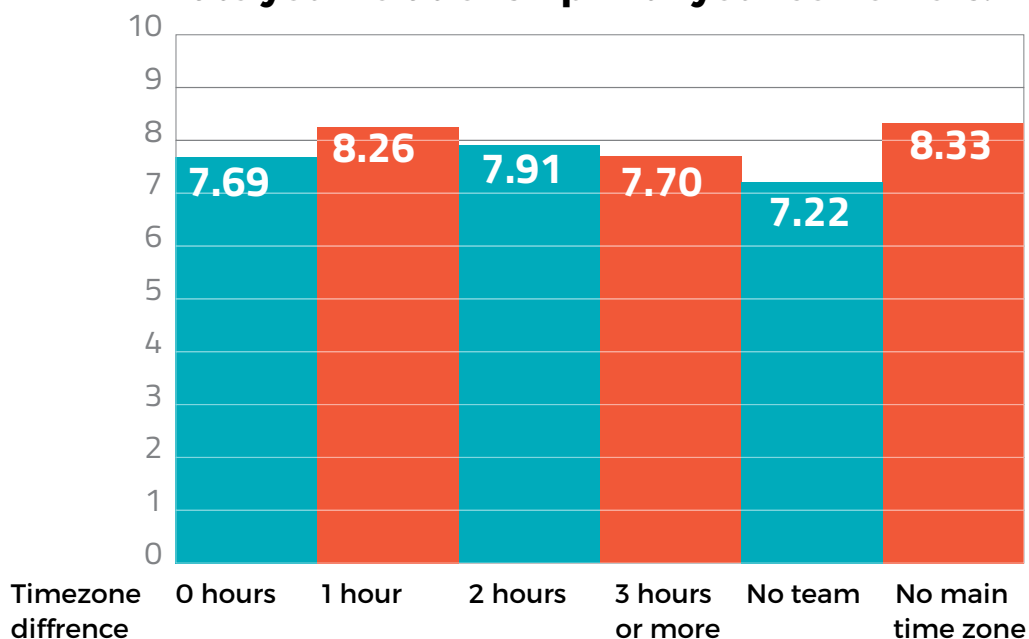
Identity

The spatial distance between workers means that teams miss out on many of the factors that cause individuals to identify with an organisation. Virtual workers have none of the key markers of a company, such as dress or the layout and design of an office. They also miss out on many of the traditional rituals associated with co-located work, such as water-cooler conversations, lunch breaks, coffee breaks, or Friday afternoon drinks. Some individuals have a strong need for affiliation - they value relationships with others and being part of a group - and as such can struggle with their sense of identity.

Temporal distance

Remote teams often have members spread across different time zones, which can cause multiple challenges for the team. A [survey by TinyPulse](#) asked what the time difference was between remote workers and their team's main time zone, and asked those workers to rate their relationships with their co-workers. The workers who were happiest were those whose team didn't have a main time zone:

On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your relationship with your coworkers.



Source: TINYpulse

Prolonged working time

When team members are spread across time zones scheduling can become difficult. One or more team members will have to stretch their working hours in order

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to accommodate meetings, either starting work early in the morning or stretching their work into late in the evening. Many will do this in addition to the hours they have already worked during the day, thus losing time to recuperate. They often don't make up that time the next day. This has the potential to put strain on people's family and social lives, and interfere with any hobbies or non-work pastimes.

Lack of information

The interdependent nature of remote teams means that team members are reliant on one another for information. Flow of information is crucial for the smooth running of the team. When the flow of information stalls, this can cause strain for team members. It is particularly problematic across big time zone differences. If a team member has work to complete and is waiting for someone for whom it is in the middle of the night, they can find themselves stalled in their work, perhaps even until the next day.

Lack of clarity

Computer mediated communication (CMC) can cause a lack of clarity within the team. This can be due to language barriers, cultural differences, and different communication styles. CMC is a less rich form of communication than face-to-face communication. Unless communication is clear and well thought-out, globally distributed teams can struggle to properly understand one another. Text sent using CMC is left to the interpretation of the person who receives the message, and the intentions of the sender may not always be carried. Nuances such as sarcasm, wit, and irony don't travel easily across cultures and may be lost.

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Electronic dependence

Members of a remote team are highly dependent on technology to carry out their job. The dominant mode of communication is often set by the company, whether that be text, audio, or video.

Message overload

Message overload happens when an individual receives too many messages for them to deal with. This could be too many emails arriving in their inbox throughout the day, or piling up over night so that they have hundreds of emails in the morning. The same can happen with chat clients, either starting work with an unmanageable number of messages in the morning or struggling to deal with a constant flow of communication throughout the working day. Team members can feel overwhelmed by the amount of information that they are expected to process in addition to all of their other tasks. This amount of communication can increase work and lengthen the working day. Longer working hours have a negative impact on family life and work-life balance.

Being “always-on”

As online workers, remote team members take their work everywhere with them. It is on their laptops and in their mobile phones. Through media like iMessage, Slack, email, Skype, and other communication platforms, remote workers are easy to contact. For those who compulsively check their phone and who have

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When communication is largely text-driven, team members may choose to send a message and wait for a response, despite being able to get a response more quickly by picking up the phone.

difficulty not responding to messages this can lead to them being “always-on”, with little time to switch off.

Asynchronous communication

Many remote teams do a large proportion of their work asynchronously. This means that they are working at different times, sending messages without necessarily getting an instantaneous answer. This can cause strain to both the person sending the message and the person receiving it. For the person sending it, a large gap between sending a message and receiving an answer can cause uncertainty and ambiguity, and can cause them to stall in their work. While for the person receiving it, they might feel obligated to respond even outside working hours.

When communication is asynchronous it is down to the message recipient to decide whether a message is urgent or not. If they decide it isn't and just let it sit, it can cause delays, uncertainty, and anxiety in the person waiting for the information.

*Unlike F2Ft, VT “physically”
cannot see whether their
team member is really
working or what they are
doing, they are not even sure
whether others pay attention
to their messages.*

Paul et. al 2005

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Work overload

Work overload is a common cause of stress for any worker. Overload happens when the work assigned exceeds the individual's capacity to complete the work or exceeds their skill level. In the context of remote work, there is no boundary between work and home which means that remote workers may take on more work than would normally be assigned in a normal office job. Remote workers often end up working outside normal working hours, which can lead to exhaustion.

A remote team member has a communication burden in addition to their normal workload which is normally not quantified. They often struggle to stay on top of communication requirements, which are considerably more than their co-located counterparts.

Cultural distance

While having a culturally diverse team is one of the strengths of working in a distributed manner, it also introduces additional stressors. When team members lack an awareness of others' cultural conditions it can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

As a team becomes more culturally diverse, the more miscommunication is likely. This increases the job demands of all members of the team, who have to work harder to understand one another and to make oneself understood.

New team members need time to acclimatise to one another and to learn about one another's practices. Traits that might be perceived negatively by one culture can be positive in others, thus making it easy

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for misunderstandings to occur. There have been numerous studies that show cross-cultural differences in communication. For example:

- ▶ in [a study of Greek and American students](#) engaged in intercultural communication the Greeks felt that the Americans were too task and self-oriented, while the American students felt the Greeks to be too social;
- ▶ [studies of instant message conversations of US and Chinese participants](#) showed argumentative conversation structure to be culturally specific;
- ▶ [hierarchical status affects work performance](#) in computer mediated communication more in Turkish students than in US students.

There are other potential biases that arise in cross-cultural communication. For example, bias occurs towards people who aren't communicating in their first language and who may have [spelling mistakes and grammatical errors](#), and emoticons and emoji are [used differently by different cultures](#).

The outcome of misunderstandings and conflict due to difference in communication styles across cultures can be a cause of anxiety and exhaustion. This can be exacerbated if individuals have never met one another in person and therefore only know each other via CMC.

Language challenges

Distributed teams can face particular challenges around language. A team will normally adopt one primary language for working in, which can place people for whom it is a second language at a disadvantage. Understanding and speaking a second language can be stressful for team members, especially when they are unfamiliar with

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common slang terms or idioms. This can be exacerbated when communicating with people outside the company, clients or customers for example.

Work-family conflict

When an individual faces incompatible demands between work and family which makes their working life difficult, they are said to face work-family conflict (when work impinges on family life) or family-work conflict (when family impinges on work obligations). The amount of time a person spends on work can negatively affect the time they can spend with their family, for example, or issues at work are brought home and affect family life. When there's a high level of such conflict it can be difficult for individuals to find time and space to rest and recuperate.

Due to the co-location of home and work, remote workers often experience little separation between the two domains. When workers are already experiencing conflict between their work and their home life, this can be exacerbated by working from home due to:

- ▶ Constant physical reminders of things that are causing stress (whether they are related to home or work);
- ▶ An inability to properly distance oneself and disconnect from the things that are causing them stress;
- ▶ The ever-present demands of both work and home, and the tension between them, can be draining on emotional energy;
- ▶ The lack of a clear space to recover from work-related activity;
- ▶ The inability to fully engage with the rest of the family's

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routines due to working unusual hours such as evening and weekends;

- ▶ Constant interruptions due to family members, neighbours, and friends' lack of understanding about working routines and practices.

As work-family conflict increases, it becomes harder and harder for a remote worker to recuperate their resources, their energy is depleted, and they are more likely to be stressed and experience burnout.

Companies may find this to be a cause of stress for team members who live with family members (such as partners, children, or parents), and who are unable to create a proper division between the two spheres.

Compared to those who engage in limited traditional and nontraditional telework and have little conflict between work and family, extensive teleworkers are likely to experience less adequate recovery time and more exposure to the tension between work and family domains, eroding resources which leads to higher levels of exhaustion.

Golden, 2011

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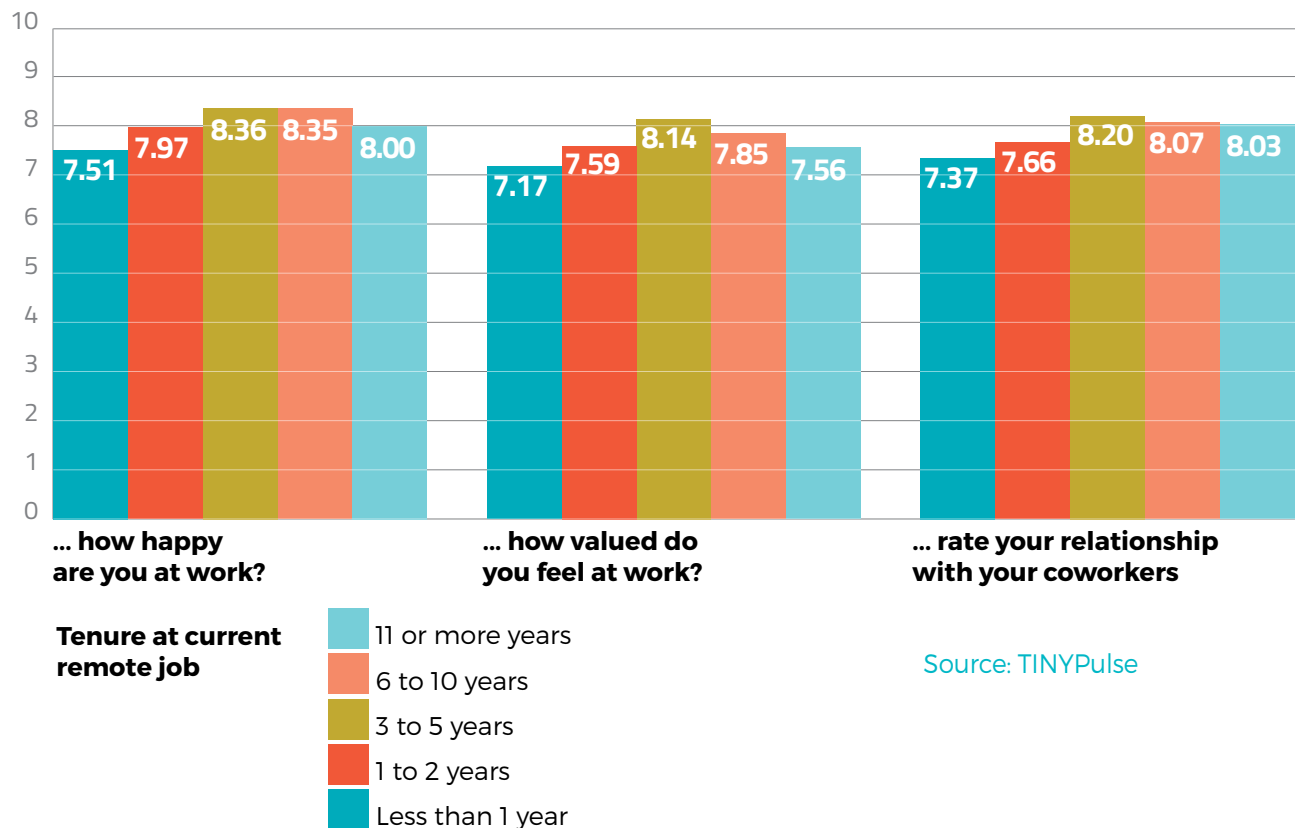
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Experience as a Contributing Factor

Team members with less experience will find it more difficult to adjust to remote work. Remote teams do not have the same social support as co-located teams and leaders are often remote, so team members have to take on greater responsibility for their jobs, their tasks, and their priorities. Those with more experience will find this easier to manage.

Research has shown that it takes about three years for remote workers to reach peak happiness in their roles, which highlights that there is a considerable adjustment period.

On a scale of 1 to 10 ...



Source: TINYPulse

Novices may be quick to get exhausted due to their eagerness to prove themselves in a new role, thereby stretching themselves too thinly by trying to stay on top of all incoming communication, and by responding to communication at all hours.

More experienced workers are better at filtering out noise, at prioritising and organising tasks so that workload stays under control, and at saying no to different requests. They have often developed a wide social support network that may stretch outside the boundaries of the company, providing support resources that they can draw on when experiencing stress.

The less experienced worker needs more social support and if it is not available they more easily feel isolated. If they do not know who to ask for help they can end up feeling helpless and distressed.

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Addressing the causes of stress

Meetups

A coping mechanism for addressing spatial distance is for companies to have face-to-face meetups. A meetup helps the team to feel more connected, both during and after the event. It's an opportunity for the team to get to know one another beyond CMC. It can be used to work on a project together, to tackle difficult problems, or just for socialising and team cohesion.

Any remote team should have regular meetups to allow team members to get to know one another, to combat isolation, and to build relationships. The benefits to a meetup far outweigh the costs. However, keep in mind that there are some secondary strains that come from meetups. Too many meetups can cause additional strain for individuals who have a travel burden and who accumulate work in their absence. Because a meetup can be intense, with employees feeling like they must extract every piece of value from them, team members can leave the event feeling drained. This is compounded if work builds up over the period of the meetup and the employee is faced with a mountain of work when they get back. This can put strain on the individual and also their family.

Meetups also privilege those who are able to travel easily. Team members with health issues may find it difficult to travel, as may those with caring responsibilities, either for children, partners, or parents. A company which expects its teams to meet regularly can end up alienating those team members who are unable to travel as frequently.

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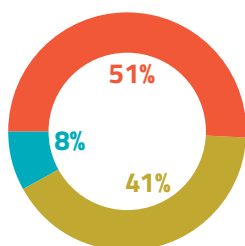
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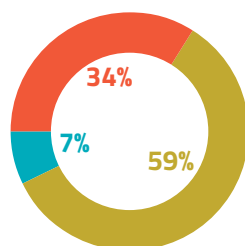
Audio and video CMC

Between in-person meetups, many companies use video and audio conferences in order to check in with one another. [Research into the effects of text, audio, video, and in-person communication](#) between friends has shown that in-person meeting creates the highest level of bonding, followed by video, then audio, and finally text. While bare text is good for the transmission of information, it falls short when it comes to creating strong interpersonal connections. Therefore, when in-person meeting isn't possible, video and audio conferencing software is a good second to maintain bonds.

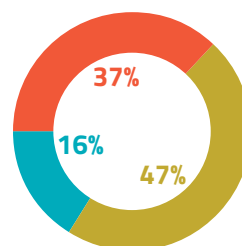
Most Beneficial Forms of Communication Between Team Members



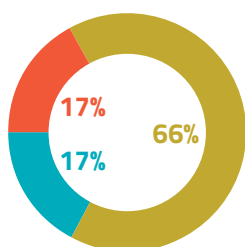
Regular face-to-face meetings



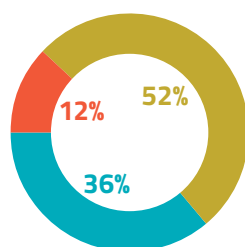
Conference calls



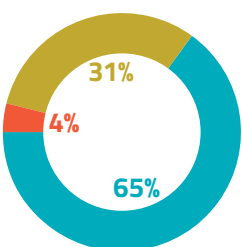
Video-conferencing



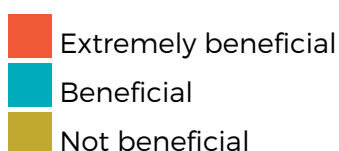
Group emails/ email discussion groups



Internal social media tools



External social media tools



Source

Rotate meeting times

Global teams often have meetings that force a few individuals to extend their working hours. Rotating meeting times means that the burden of extending working hours is shared amongst individuals in the company. In a globally distributed team it can be hard to find meeting times that suit everyone, but by sharing the burden it means that no one is inconvenienced for an extended period of time.

Clear communication guidelines

Set clear expectations about communication for the whole team. Are team members expected to respond to messages outside of working hours? If yes, is it all messages or just ones marked urgent or ones from a specific person? If no, how should a team member deal with a situation when they can't get an answer but they need one? Each company will have its own communication guidelines that fits its needs. Whatever the company decides about its communication guidelines, the most important aspect is that they are set and understood company-wide. Clarity can help reduce uncertainty and strain, and create a set of norms across the company.

Clear HR policies

It's important to have clear HR policies so that individuals always know what to expect. HR policies should cover everything that could come up during a person's employment, including maternity, paternity, and adoption leave, illness and bereavement, travel and expenses policies, bullying and harassment policies, and a clear grievance procedure. If your company hires both employees and contractors who act like employees (i.e. they are from another country to your head office and can't be employed), it makes sense for team cohesion to provide the same rights to everyone. If this is not the case it should be made clear in your team handbook.

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Make sure team members take holidays

Downtime is important at an individual and at a team level. For individuals it is important to rest and recuperate resources; this contributes to the overall wellbeing of the team. Unlimited holiday policies may appear progressive and generous, but it can be [difficult for people to take much time off](#) depending on the type of work or the culture. Managers and team leads should ensure that individuals are taking holiday. A minimum holiday policy can help to set expectations that at least a certain number of days should be taken each year.

Intercultural exchange

Remote team members will have a better understanding of each other's online communication style and working practices if they can get a better grasp of their respective cultures. You can help them to do this by encouraging co-working and intercultural exchanges. The company could run a scheme that enables individuals to travel to work with other team members so that they can forge better relationships and understanding.

Intercultural training

For teams that have individuals from diverse and disparate cultures, intercultural training can help team members to have an understanding of the details and intricacies of other cultural backgrounds. This alleviates additional responsibility taken on by team members who have to work hard to understand and make themselves understood. Intercultural training can enrich your team, allowing members to enhance their worldview and learn how to critically appraise intercultural situations.

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Be aware of language differences

It's important to make all team members sensitive to the difficulties faced by people who aren't communicating in their native language. Local slang should be kept to a minimum, or explained so that members of the team understand what is being said. When new employees start who are communicating in their non-native language they should be offered additional support during the first months of their employment until they are accustomed to the unfamiliar mode of communication.

Create support networks

Support from co-workers can help individuals to feel less isolated, brings clarity to their role, reduces overall uncertainty, and improves team performance. There are many different types of support networks that you could create in your company: peer-to-peer support, mentorship programmes, internal support groups. Try to ensure that all of your team members are connected to and supported by another individual.

Set clear limits

Be clear about expectations in terms of working hours and workload. Create a culture in which team members are able to say no when they feel that they are becoming overloaded. Managers often have little concept of an individual's quantitative workload, and therefore the responsibility is shifted from manager to individual to control how much work they have. Team members should be able to fully benefit from their off-work time, and should not feel obligated to work all of the time.

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Set team and company goals

Prioritising work is an important self-management skill which allows workers to stay in control of what they are doing and manage overload. Individuals are able to prioritise when the team has a clear and shared understanding of its goals. This enables them to make decisions and prioritise the competing requirements of different elements of their job.

Support information exchange

The more team members feel isolated, the more the boundaries between work and home are blurred. The company should support information exchange at all levels, from information related to work to personal information that helps individuals to get to know one another.

Be aware of family and home circumstances

It is helpful if managers cultivate an awareness of workers' conditions at home in order to help mitigate any work-family conflict. As it is difficult to be aware of local family conditions of all workers, it's important to create a culture in which work-family conflict can be raised, discussed, addressed, and taken seriously.

Provide a remote working allowance

A remote working allowance can empower people to make decisions about how and where they work. This could be used to pay for a co-working space or office, to pay for coffee for sitting in coffee shops for an hour, for ergonomic office equipment so that they stay comfortable, or a big set of headphones to block out the world. This encourages people to create a distinction

between their home life and their work, which can help alleviate strain related to work-family conflict. It also ensures that any office cost savings made by the company are not at the expense of an increase in financial burden to the worker.

Develop trust

It's important to engender trust from the outset. Team members should be able to trust that their roles are secure, that they will be listened to, and that they can come to management with anything confidential. A lack of trust within a remote team can increase an individual's sense of isolation and anxiety. To help develop trust, create an atmosphere in which people feel like they can speak up and be listened to, and ensure that there are always clear paths for issues to be raised.

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Dealing with stress as an individual

While there are measures that can be taken at a team level to help alleviate the negative effects of stress, there are things that you can do as an individual too. It's important that you feel empowered by your team to make decisions that help you to maintain better occupational health.

Steps that you can take include:

- ▶ Accept that it is not always possible to complete all of your work
- ▶ Learn to prioritise:
 - Figure out what's important in your life and how your work slots into that
 - Prioritise the most important project you're working on
 - Define the most important priorities for your role
- ▶ Create routines that:
 - help to differentiate between work time and non-work time
 - identify what is essential and what isn't
 - clearly define how you will spend your time
- ▶ Create boundaries
 - Work at a co-working space or office
 - Schedule non-work time every week

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- ▶ Find somewhere to work with no distractions
- ▶ Take breaks regular breaks
- ▶ Take holidays where you completely recharge
- ▶ Combat isolation by making time for human interaction
- ▶ Stay focused by turning off communication services. Multitasking does not work!

Resources

[Coping with coping strategies: how distributed teams and their members deal with the stress of distance, time zones and culture](#), by Niina Nurmi

[Work stressors related to geographic distance and electronic dependence in virtual teams](#), by Niina Nurmi

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[Why are teleworkers stressed? An empirical analysis of the causes of telework-enabled stress](#), by Christoph Weinert, Christian Maier, Sven Laumer

[Global virtual teams: a cure - or a cause - of stress](#), by Sharon Glazer, Małgorzata W. Kożusznik, Irina A. Shargo

[Theories of Psychological Stress at work](#), by Philip J. Dewe, Michael P. O'Driscoll, Cary L. Cooper

[Stress in virtual team vs face to face team: is working in virtual team more stressful than a face-to-face team?](#), by Bo-Chiuan Su, Andreaa E. Widjaja, Jengchunc Victor Chen

[Altering the Effects of Work and Family Conflict on Exhaustion: Telework During Traditional and Nontraditional Work Hours](#), by Timothy D. Golden

[PGi 2015 Global Telework Survey: Trends around the world shaping the future of work](#)

[What leaders need to know about remote workers: surprising differences in workplace happiness & relationships](#), by TinyPULSE

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