

How to be Agile when Remote Work is Our Reality

Almost two years into the COVID-19, and it's now more apparent than ever that remote work is here to stay. However, it seems as if there are still a number of organizations and individuals that are still struggling to adapt the new remote reality of the workplace.

Many organizations have considered bringing their employees and consultants back on-site, even though the pandemic has not actually ended and, more importantly, employees don't want to go back on-site. The reason is because a significant number of agile coaches and agile teams have not been as effective during this time. In addition, organizational expectations have not substantively changed. They have challenged their teams to maintain the same levels of productivity, throughput, and quality of delivery on the same schedule, despite the reduced efficiency of communication and collaboration.

Now, it's possible to meet that challenge. Distributed teams aren't new; we've been solving these problems for years. It's just a matter of scale and whether your organization is committed to providing teams with the resources necessary to rise to the challenge effectively. It's tempting to expect your employees to make do with the tools and resources currently available to them, but that's a short-term benefit that will lead to long-term consequences. Instead, recognize the circumstances of delivery have changed. **A small investment now will pay dividends in the future.**

Three Ways To Do Agile Remotely



**Make Communication
Easy**



**Encourage Continuous
Collaboration**



**Take Advantage of
Remote Work**

1. Make Communication Easy

The first and most important thing you can do is to make it as easy as possible for your employees to communicate with each other and anyone else with which they may need to collaborate (e.g., vendors, suppliers, external partners). Be wary of communicating by e-mail. Two Fortune 500 companies we've supported during the pandemic use email as the primary form of communication. This allows individuals to send emails, content in knowing that they did their part, and then wait one to two to three days for responses before following up.

Email is an incredibly ineffective form of communication that allows us to pass the buck to other employees when things go wrong. *"It's not my fault. I emailed so and so three days ago,"* should not be the battle cry of the pandemic.

Instead, consider an well-established hierarchy of effective communication methods already used for coaching and training:

- Face-to-face communication is the most effective form of communication.
- If you cannot meet face to face, use a video call.
- If you cannot meet on video, use a phone call.
- If you cannot get on the phone, use an instant messenger (IM).
- If you cannot reach someone via IM, use email.

The secret sauce to this method is, if you must use email, ***use e-mail to schedule a conversation.***

So, invest in the right set of collaboration tools that will simulate face-to-face communication and team environments as much as possible. There are **organizational tools** that allow teams to simulate office space with private rooms and open areas. You can engage with anyone in an open area, or "knock" on the door of anyone who's in a private room.

Additionally, you may want to consider that some larger organizations tend to have multiple tools. Giving every department or team the freedom to choose their tool may seem like a good idea, but it often becomes harder for people to communicate because now they need to identify the appropriate communication channels. It's even worse if you have to download or install new tools just to speak to a specific person, something you may not even have permission to do if you don't have administrative rights on your work computer.

So, what's the answer?

- Simplify. Simplify the choices and enable everyone to use the organizational tool of choice effectively.

One challenge of simplifying your communication stack is that some organizations won't be able to change their tool sets, especially if they're external partners or vendors. You likely won't be able to dictate how they communicate with you, so you'll want to find a compromise. There are integrations between different commercial tools you could leverage, or you could agree to communicate via email with phone follow-ups to get resolutions quicker. Ultimately, you'll have to accept or mitigate the less effective communication that comes with not being on the same platforms.

2. Encourage Continuous Collaboration

Once you have a simplified communication tool set, think about how to encourage continuous collaboration between the people who work together regularly. The single most efficient team I've ever worked with had a team culture of dialing into the same video call every morning and then staying on the call all day. The agreement was that you could keep your camera pointed at the top of your head so nobody could see you, but they could see you were present. And then collaboration was easy. The team could just unmute themselves and talk to anyone else. It wasn't magic, just a team recognizing the situation and coming to an agreement on how to best stay effective at a distance.

Whatever you decide to do, you need to enable your people to reach each other and get answers quickly. If you have another approach to achieve those same outcomes, go for it!

For software engineers, managing check-ins and change sets requires a base level of collaboration with the other engineers on their teams. But if you're in a less-collaborative, non-software environment such as finance, human resources, or any of the other dozen major corporate functions, you may find virtual collaboration a lot harder. The single biggest challenge will always be version control of whatever documents on which you're working. Wouldn't it be much easier if you invested in a tool suite that allows for multi-user editing and collaboration? Then version control is not an issue because everybody is working out of the same place, and the files will inherently track all changes for you. I've commonly heard from organizations that already have an instance of SharePoint that their teams can just use it for this. To be clear, **SharePoint** is not your solution to this problem, unless it is part of the larger Office 365 toolsuite. It is a great file management system with a lot of valuable applications, but increasing collaboration is not one of them. It is up to the team and to your organization to ensure effective collaboration is taking place. Providing access to the correct tools is just the beginning.

3. Take Advantage of Remote Work

Once you have teams working and communicating together effectively at a distance, it's time to consider taking advantage of the unique opportunity that remote work offers your employees. Since the pandemic started, there's been an unprecedented increase in the demand for remote training and online learning. While this may require more preparation for the instructors and an investment in remote training tools, the flexibility outweighs the cost. Employees no longer have to travel or sacrifice entire workdays (or weeks) to get a professional certification. Also, if you are an instructor, the more people you can get into your classes, the wider your voice will spread and the more influence you can create in the organizations with which you're working.

The shift towards remote coaching and training has been a long time coming. We have the opportunity to ride the wave of the next generation of workers and their expectations around working in and around the office. If we set ourselves up for it, we will be able to meet the changing expectations without sacrificing quality, time to market, and most importantly- employee engagement.