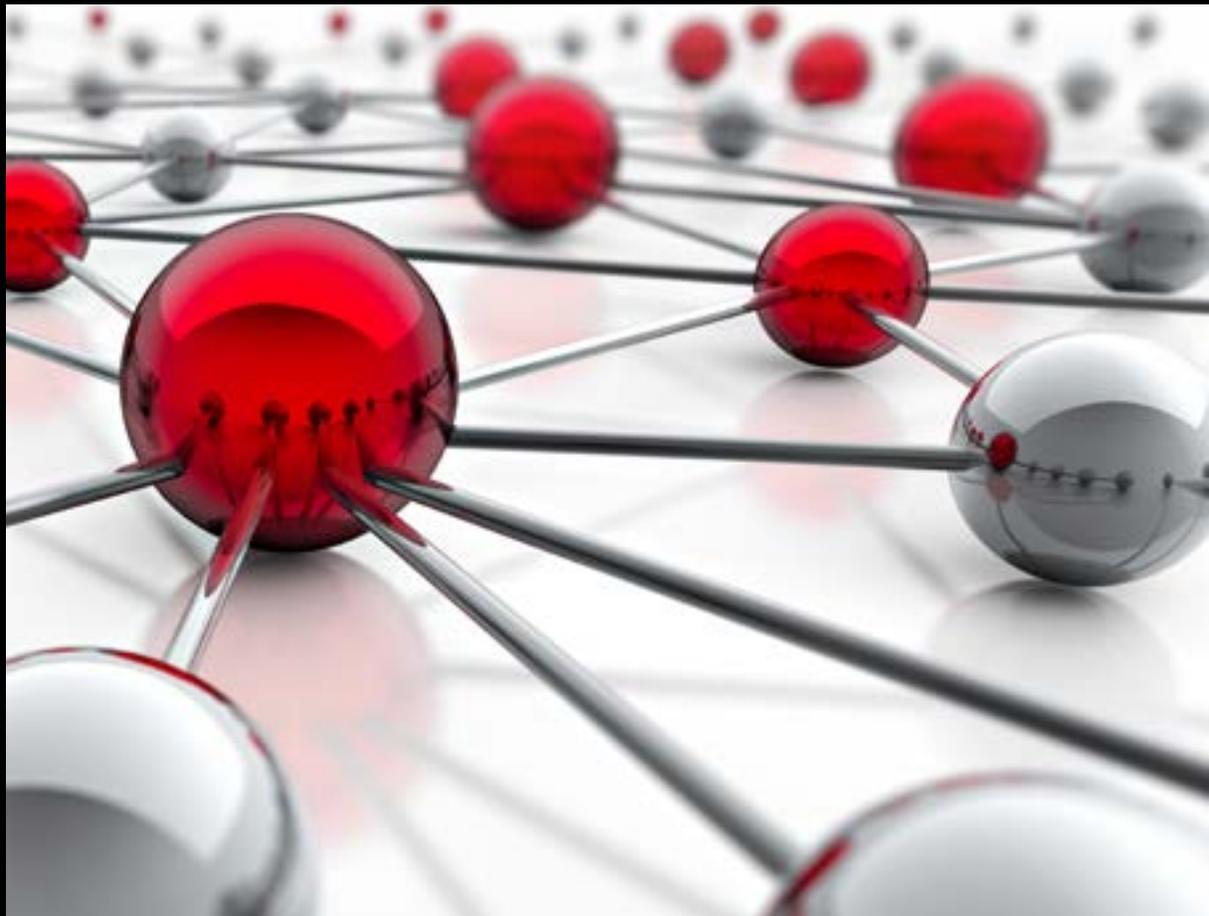


COMCAST
BUSINESS

A DISTRIBUTED WORKFORCE TOOLKIT

FOR THE LONG HAUL



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As remote employees assume a bigger role in the workforce, you need a strategy for ensuring and sustaining their performance.

KEEPING EVERYONE ON THE SAME PAGE



Virtual employment is on the rise. The question is not whether your company is going to have a distributed workforce, but how you're going to make this trend most productive for your business and the members of your team.

In March 2017, [Gallup reported](#) that 43 percent of employees “spent at least some of their time working in a location different from that of their coworkers” in 2016, up from 39 percent in 2012. The amount of time spent working off-site is also on the rise: 31 percent of those surveyed worked away from the office for 80

percent of their time—equivalent to four days of a five-day workweek. That pace was reported by just 24 percent of respondents in 2012.

At the same time, [the polling organization found](#) that while the percentage of employees who work remotely full-time is rising, those employees have the lowest levels of engagement within the virtual workforce. According to its survey, just 30 percent of those employees are engaged (a figure equal to the level of engagement among employees who never work remotely, the results revealed).

As a small business owner, you can take steps to help ensure that your remote employees hit your targets for individual performance and contributions to team success. Through both cultural initiatives and use of the right tools and technologies, your company can encourage interaction, knowledge-sharing, and collaborative problem-solving. These all play a role in converting a group of people employed by the same company into a true virtual team.



PROJECT MANAGEMENT, PLUGGED IN

When you're leading a distributed workforce, mobile, cloud, and collaboration technologies all have a role in supporting your project management priorities and objectives. Knowing what you need can help you to understand dashboard capabilities, identify the right project management solutions, and equip your project heads to remain focused on team leadership rather than transactional micromanagement.

When assessing your options, consider the business intelligence that you need to produce through the solution. "Pick a tool that can get the job done, and then the tool gets out of the way and lets you do the work," says Bob Frisch, managing partner at The Strategic Offsites Group and co-author, with Robert M. Galford and Cary Greene, of [Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace](#). He recommends testing several and then choosing one that you like, that your employees will use, and that presents no system compatibility or interoperability problems with major customers and vendors.

“It’s not so much the functionality as the quality of the information that goes into the dashboard,” says Harold Kerzner, Ph.D., senior executive director for Project Management at the [International Institute for Learning](#) and author of [Project Management Metrics, KPIs, and Dashboards: A Guide to Measuring and Monitoring Project Performance](#). “Today, in dashboard reporting, we measure benefits that are being achieved, business value that’s being created, how we’re mitigating risks, safety, quality. There are numerous things that we can put in a dashboard today.”

Depending on the information you need, the dashboard can be customized in line with the decisions you need to make. This functionality



“is significantly improving our decision-making capability to the point where fewer and fewer projects are failing because we have real-time data, and people are able to make meaningful decisions,” Kerzner says.

With that in mind, your best strategy is to focus not on comparative capabilities of

UNDERUSED DASHBOARD CAPABILITIES

It’s easy to get caught up in the “cool factor” of technology tools’ features. But what’s really cool? The benefits and competitive advantages those features can create for your company.

When comparing virtual collaboration and communication tools, Bob Frisch looks for those that offer the ability to conduct real-time group polling via keypads. These survey solutions allow employees to text a response to a question or request posed during an audio or video conference. The tool can also be used to assess group members’ level of understanding of new concepts or strategies as they’re introduced.

“There’s a number to text in to,” he says. “You can text a number one through ten, and bang, you get a bar chart of who answered what. And that can also be very effective in terms of making sure that a silent majority is not overlooked.”

Sometimes, features are underutilized not because they’re unknown, but because people don’t know how to operate them to full effect, he adds. For example, in video conferencing, it’s relatively easy to set up the camera so that it automatically focuses on whoever is speaking. “But the hosts of meetings have to know how to operate that.” The same holds for screen sharing and document sharing.

When comparing features, think about which will help the team and project move forward. Then choose the apps and tools best equipped to meet that criteria.

various project management platforms, but rather on creating a project management dashboard strategy. Know what your key metrics are, which metrics you need to focus on and which are going to just be distractions, and harvest the data you need to achieve your goals.

ENCOURAGING INNOVATION

Remote employees need a means of expressing opinions, offering critiques, and proposing new ideas. At the same time, virtual managers must use a combination of technology and techniques to demonstrate that the company welcomes this input and recognizes and rewards those who promote innovation.

“Whatever you see in a world where people work in an office together is magnified with distance,” Frisch says. Workers who are quiet in the office—and, likewise, those inclined to dominate conversations—will exhibit those qualities even more strongly in a remote workplace. Leadership, then, requires an elevated awareness of and sensitivity to those dynamics.

One technology remedy to uneven participation is using video rather than audio conferencing. Because everyone is on camera, the leader can monitor attention levels, body language, and nonverbal cues. Make sure you have the bandwidth necessary for seamless communication among all team members via videoconferencing.

A good project manager also looks for ways to accommodate the speed with which people form opinions and are prepared to express them. “Some people want to give you a quick answer,” Frisch says. “Some people want to give you a really good answer. And there are people who see those as mutually exclusive.”

To elicit more participation from those who are normally reticent, he advises project managers or group leaders to sound them out in advance of a big group discussion. If they provide good input, ask: “Would it be OK if I called on you to express that opinion? I think everybody should hear it, and rather than me repeat it, I’d rather they



hear it directly from you,” Frisch says. “Usually people say it’s fine, because they know it’s coming and they’ll have a chance to think about it. You don’t get your most productive work by putting people on the spot.”

And then there’s what he calls “the big missing”—celebrations. In a physical office, when the company lands a new account or wins an award, the company will celebrate, even if that just means exchanging high-fives or bringing in coffee and donuts.

“How do you get people who don’t work physically together to feel that they’re part of a team on an emotional level? If you can’t have spontaneity, you have to think about celebrations,” he says. To achieve that, consider celebrating people at the start of meetings. Mention new client wins, project breakthroughs, and other milestones, and offer praise and congratulations to the individuals or teams responsible. This requires planning because it can’t happen spontaneously, but those deliberate actions help to build a feeling of community.

MANAGING COMPETITION AND CONFLICT

Even when you succeed in creating a collaborative culture, you’ll inevitably encounter instances of in-house rivalry

and disagreement. In the face of those challenges, it’s essential to build consensus and keep the team cohesive and on course.

Periodic in-person gatherings can help, and those should include a mix of business and social activities. Give your team members a chance to feel personally connected to one another.

Another strategy is monitoring the way team members are communicating via various

DIY VIRTUAL SUGGESTION BOX

You’ve heard the saying: “If you can walk, you can dance. If you can talk, you can sing.” Here’s a business variation on that theme: If you can run a company, you can build an app. With the rise of low-code and no-code development platforms, you really can.

One example: In less than two hours, you can [build a virtual suggestion box app](#). The five-step process created by Trailhead/Salesforce involves:

- Creating the app
- Adding custom fields
- Modifying the user experience
- Adding business logic
- Creating reports and dashboards

Not ready to become an app developer? You can also check out free suggestion box apps on [iTunes](#) or [Google Play](#).



platforms. Comments made via email can convey unintended attitudes or biases that sow mistrust or defensiveness. Look for the communication platforms your team members can use most productively.

And to manage group dynamics in virtual meetings, make sure all participants understand the meeting objective. Then, as group leader, keep everyone focused on that objective so that distractions don't derail the conversation.

All employees need a team-oriented culture supported by the collaboration, communication, and project management tools and technologies required to do their best work. When leading a distributed workforce, those needs come into sharper focus. By providing remote employees with adequate and appropriate support, you create the conditions necessary for your distributed workforce—and your business—to thrive.

CYBER SECURITY FOR THE VIRTUAL ENTERPRISE

According to the 2017 edition of Symantec Corporation's [Internet Security Threat Report](#):

- Malware embedded in email rose to a five-year high. It was found in one in 131 emails.
- Spear-phishing (a type of targeted email spoofing) was directed at 400 businesses daily and cost them \$3 billion over the past three years.
- Cloud databases that are not kept updated or have authentication turned off are at increased risk of being hijacked and held for ransom. Symantec urges business owners to “get a firmer grip on . . . cloud app usage and access.”

In the virtual workplace, where employees are accessing email, data, and dashboards via mobile devices, companies are taking a new approach to security, Kerzner says. Rather than trying to ensure security on cell phones and other devices, they're protecting data, intellectual property, and proprietary or competitive information by keeping it housed and controlled on a company intranet.

This allows them to, “with reasonable accuracy, control the security,” he says. “It's all password protected. There are all sorts of codes on it. Security is a lot easier to control if the dashboards are continuously going to be updated with new features and functionality.”

This approach limits risk by limiting access to information, even among employees. “On a company intranet, I can restrict the information to certain passwords. I can tell a certain project team, here's your password just for this project,” Kerzner says. “Only certain information on

the intranet will be matched to their password. So, they won't be able to see what's happening on other projects, because their passwords won't authorize it."

Another strategy is to create a cloud-based, password-protected [virtual data room](#) that affords you the level of security and access restrictions you need. Like a company intranet, this option polices the way information is accessed and therefore relieves your company of the burden of keeping tabs on each individual employee's devices and means of connecting online. You can find reviews of some popular virtual data room solutions [here](#).

Another data security issue to keep on your radar is the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation that goes into effect in May 2018. If your company has customers, vendors, or partners in EU countries, this [FAQ](#) can help you understand your data handling responsibilities under the new rules

RESOURCES FOR REMOTE TEAM-BUILDING

Use these online references to convert a distributed workforce into a virtual team

A distributed workforce can strengthen your company's talent pool, provide diverse perspectives that enhance competitiveness, and improve productivity. But employees who spend little or no time in the same physical location can feel disconnected from one another. In the virtual environment, one of a leader's key roles is to promote and nurture human interaction, mutual support, and team cohesion. These articles, online tools, and other resources can help you develop a collaborative climate in which employees share a sense of purpose and support one another in pursuing individual and collective goals.

Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

"When people aren't in the same room, the potential for misunderstanding and other communications issues grows," notes the introduction to this video, [Managing Virtual Teams](#). In it, Professor Leigh Thompson reviews "four steps to humanizing your virtual team" to manage conflict and achieve the group's goals.

[Teamwork 101](#) is a series of four "video toolboxes" in which Professor Thompson provides an overview of designing teams for success; optimizing team decision making, people skills, and emotional intelligence; and creativity and innovation in teams.

The Strategic Offsites Group

(Note: Some of these resources were originally published in *Harvard Business Review* articles or blog posts.)

In this recording of a radio program, Bob Frisch speaks on The Matt Townsend Show to discuss how to [Make Meetings Better](#).

What does it take to ensure that meetings contribute to productivity and completion of goals? To answer that question, the company advises: [Don't End a Meeting Without Doing These 3 Things](#).

You know the importance of making team members feel included and valued, yet not all input contributes to collaboration and accomplishment. Here, the company offers advice about [The Right Way to Cut People Off in Meetings](#).

When your company reaches agreement on a decision that's subsequently questioned or ignored, productivity suffers. [Why Decisions Get Second-Guessed, and What to Do About It](#) offers strategies for staying on track.

Harvard Business Review

Conflicts among employees may reflect personality clashes or task-related issues. [How to Manage Conflict in Virtual Teams](#) offers practical advice designed to ensure that these battles don't escalate or pose a threat to team and project success.

A good metric for assessing team and organizational health is “the average lag time between identifying problems and discussing them,” says the author of [How to Raise Sensitive Issues During a Virtual Meeting](#). The article provides a strategy for preventing those issues from derailing trust, engagement, decision making, productivity, and more.

Teams need “enabling conditions” to thrive. [The Secrets of Great Teamwork](#) shows how to take “a systematic approach to analyzing how well your team is set up to succeed—and identifying where improvements are needed.”