

Strategies for Successful Remote Collaboration

How teams can stay connected, productive and inspired while working alone

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This article is part of our Steelcase 360 series [Making Distance Work](#) about working remotely.

Teams today suddenly find themselves isolated from one another, as they work remotely, often for the first time, unsure about how to get their work done.

As organizations around the world face seemingly insurmountable challenges, the ability to innovate is crucial to how well they weather the storm. They need to find creative solutions in all aspects of their business — adopting new processes, embracing technology in new ways and fostering a culture that is agile and adaptable. Innovation is critical to navigate the immediate crisis and to position themselves for success after it passes.

But innovation is hard, even under the best conditions. It requires teams to be actively engaged with one another in a rapid exchange of ideas, where teammates can build on each other's thoughts and make concepts visible to each other. That's tough to do when people are in the same room, but today, teams suddenly find themselves isolated from one another and unsure about how to get their work done as they work remotely, often for the first time. Product development teams, operations and other disciplines are rapidly trying to pivot their work to meet the new demands of the current reality. Many are being asked to create new things from scratch in just a few days — not in months or years.

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Patricia Kammer
Principal Researcher, Steelcase

Creating something new, whether it's a process or a product, is called generative collaboration and requires different types of behaviors and activities to be successful. Informative collaboration is mostly about sharing or coordinating tasks and evaluative collaboration is mostly about looking at options and making choices. Neither is very complex, but when you're doing generative collaboration you're braiding or intertwining different positions or points of view, and also trying to build and/or push the work forward," says Steelcase Principal Researcher Patricia Kammer. "This is why the key to successful generative collaboration is for team members to be on the same page, not only when they're working together as a team in synchronized activities, but also when they break away and do asynchronous work (work alone)."

Everyone on the team needs to have a solid understanding of what teammates are working on and how that impacts their individual work so when they come back together they are able to move the project forward. If team members are not on the same page, they will end up spending more time doing rework, which will impact their speed.

But how can teams doing generative collaboration stay on the same page when they're working remotely? According to Kammer, the first thing they should do for remote collaboration is find digital ways to replicate the analog processes (such as whiteboards and sticky notes) they use when they're working side-by-side. "When it comes to generative work, teams need a digital platform where they can co-create content," explains Kammer. "By leveraging tools like Mural (digital sticky notes you can organize in lists, flowcharts, diagrams, frameworks, methods and drawings to activate and align teams), Google Drive and Microsoft Teams, teams are able to orchestrate their work across the platform and develop a shared mind, a shared historical reference of where they are and where they're going."

John Hamilton, Coalesse design director, understands this is not easy. He has spent most of his career designing new products in collaboration with teammates around the world and exploring how to make diverse locations and time zones into a strength to be leveraged rather than a challenge to overcome. Since 2017, John has been based at Steelcase's Learning and Innovation Center (LINC) in Munich, where he has built a global research and development design team, which has introduced innovative products, like the carbon fiber Less Than Five Chair (which literally weighs less than five pounds and can be easily moved and stacked).

Find Common Language

According to Hamilton, teams need to leverage common tools to make the process more transparent and fluid. The problem, he says, is that individuals are often using a lot of different tools to do their individual work, which they can easily share when they are physically located together. But when they're in different locations, like many people who are working from home during the crisis, the use of different digital tools can lead to confusion, a lack of understanding and ultimately slowed-down processes.

His advice: "You have to find a common language. If we all use the same tools, then we can access them in equal ways and the content becomes egalitarian. And the more egalitarian it becomes, the more we all feel like we can go in and own it and edit it in the same way. It's not leader-led. It's not individually owned. Everyone feels like they can contribute."

“There are a lot of technology tools that can help us. But none of them are perfect and you need to experiment with what combination of tools work best for your team.”

Peter Boeckel
Regional Design Manager, Steelcase Asia Pacific

For example, Hamilton’s team has recently partnered with Autodesk and are using tools that allow one person to be in a 3D model while others can watch and have the ability to comment and even take over and manipulate the object. When you’re able to do things like this, says Hamilton, the “barrier of not being next to your content will go away.”

Peter Boeckel, manager of the Steelcase Asia Pacific regional design team in Hong Kong knows first hand how important this is. For the past six months his team has been forced to work remotely, first when the Hong Kong protests broke out and then again with the Covid-19 crisis. “Our team works in the abstract and with a lot of assumptions,” says Boeckel. “Now that we’re working remotely, we have to put a lot of effort into how we document the work, how we share and gather input and how we keep fragile and abstract ideas floating. There are a lot of technology tools that can help us. But none of them are perfect and you need to experiment with what combination of tools work best for your team.”

The more teams can become fluent in using shared digital tools to capture and create a visual representation of their thinking, and then manipulate it, the less physical distance will be a barrier to collaboration. But this is not something that comes naturally since people are more accustomed to doing this when sitting next to one another. “Distributed teams will need to get better at digitally capturing their content throughout the process to make it visible to everyone,” says Hamilton. “Without doing this, it makes it more difficult for me as a leader to get your mind to a place where I need you to be. When we have something we can reference during our conversation — you can see it, I can see it, we’re seeing the same thing and then we talk about it — it makes it more fluid and more natural. This will make the creative process much easier. ”

Living on Video

Video is another important tool that can help improve generative collaboration. Today, most web video platforms allow people to see one another as well as share content. When people can see each other, they’re able to interpret body language, gestures, expressions and other cues that help you “read the room” and they’re less likely to interrupt or speak over one another or multi-task. But it’s not without some limitations.

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"When you're using these collaborative tools, people are often looking at the content, so it's harder to interpret nonverbal cues which can lead to confusion," says Kammer. "Teams need to learn to enable equal participation, especially of those who are less talkative during the meeting. You need to stop and say, 'Jim, did you want to say something?' because Jim may not know when he can jump in." Kammer suggests using features like the chat function to help make sure everyone can participate fully. "Instead of verbally interrupting, people can use chat to indicate they have questions or need clarification," advises Kammer. "This running dialogue can be monitored by someone who can pull it into the conversation at an appropriate time and make sure everyone is heard."

A lesson from Agile

Kammer also recommends remote teams identify someone who can orchestrate and manage all the different work streams. Many co-located teams do not have this type of role today. Like a scrum master on an agile team, remote teams need someone to keep track of the larger goals to ensure transparency and alignment. “This person will be responsible for knowing what everyone is doing and making sure everyone is working on the right things,” she says. “Clearly understanding how my work fits into a larger stream of activities is especially important when people aren’t physically connected anymore. Remote work requires a lot more formalization of what would be more informal in the office.”

Find Your Community

Work is an incredibly social activity. But working remotely can lead to isolation and the feeling of being disconnected, which can hurt collaboration. “The energy and dynamic nature when people are next to each other can really be contagious and make a generative session really powerful when people are physically connected,” says Hamilton. “Now, we have to find that while we’re distributed.” Some ideas for staying connected: Schedule “Social Hours” where you don’t discuss work, log into video to have a consistent ‘wormhole’ of connecting with each other even if everyone is doing individual work, do a pulse check at the beginning of your daily standup for a few minutes to see how people are feeling. Increase rituals that would be almost common in the office and then duplicate them virtually.

“Find your community, your tribe, your people, and make sure you stay connected,” says Hamilton. “Share as much as you can so you can also receive as much as you want. The more you give, the more you get. Who do you look to or what ways can you find others that are doing similar things that you can share and build on and feel connected to a greater purpose? I think staying curious and staying connected to the things you’re working on or believe in and finding groups that you can connect with digitally can be very rich.”

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