

COMMUNICATIONS IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a hybrid work environment, organizations need to make effective use of multiple communication methods and platforms to enable employees to achieve their goals. However, the overall objective should always be focused on ensuring clear communications.

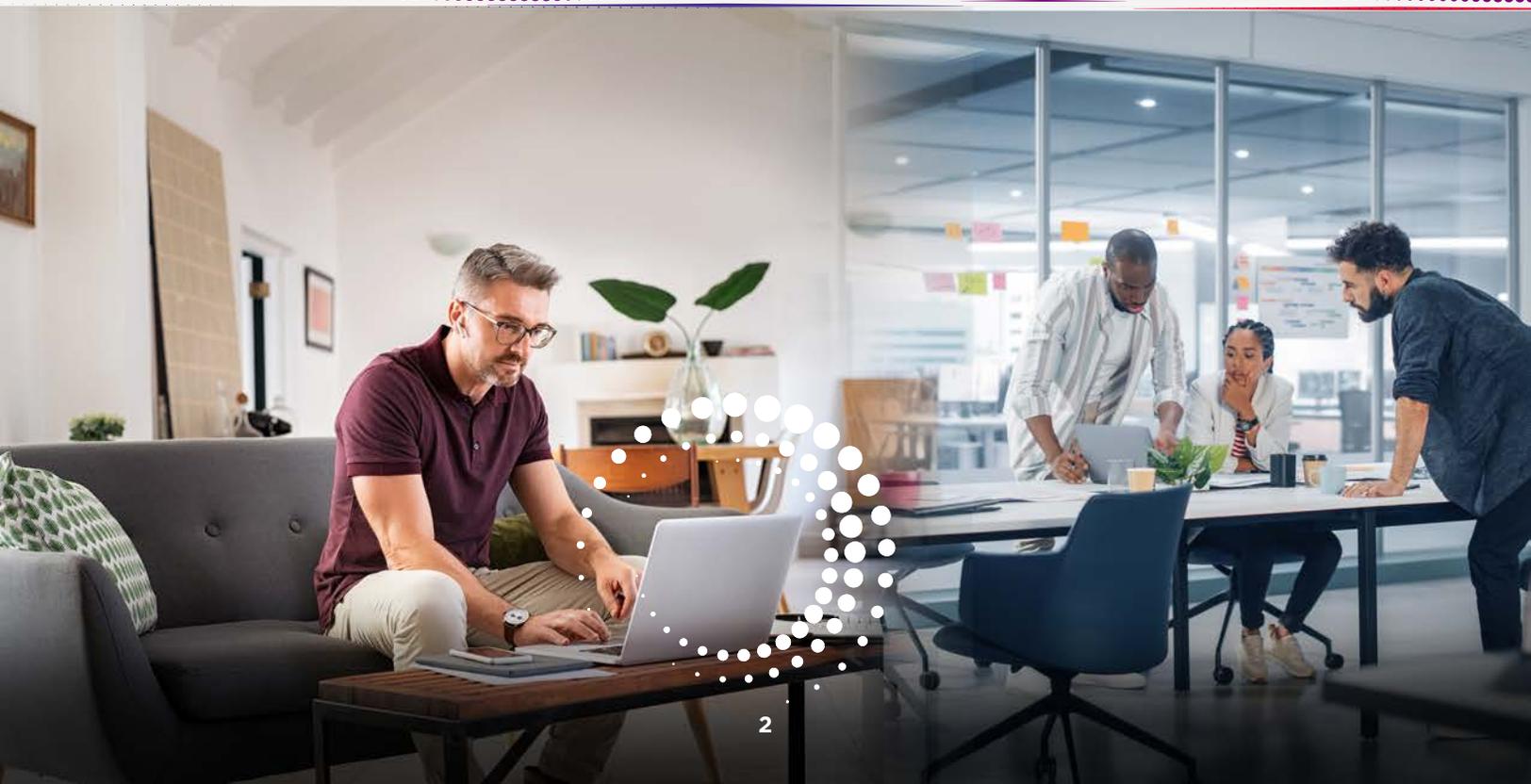
From the risks of employee isolation and burnout to all manner of cyberthreats from the rapid, unsecure expansion of the corporate wide area network (WAN), remote work presents new challenges for both employer and employee.

Many are embarking on this remote work journey together. Just as some employees have never worked remotely before, there are managers who have never led a team remotely before, and IT departments that have never faced the challenges of equipping and supporting a remote workforce with secure connectivity to the WAN virtually overnight.

As a result, some businesses are struggling to adapt with remote policies, technologies, and equipment. Not surprising considering they may not have traveled this road before.

Failure to recognize the dangers of a remote-first or hybrid work environment presents risk to the organization in terms of employee engagement, productivity, and security.

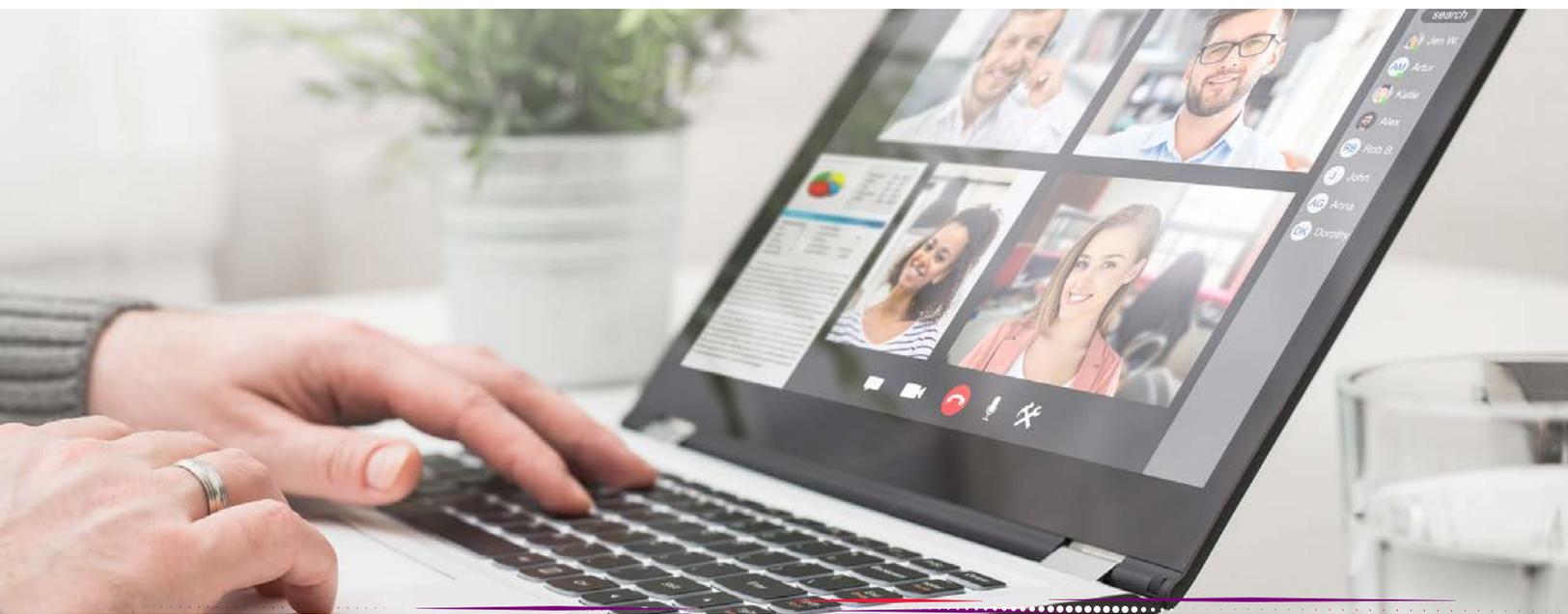
This white paper reviews several challenges and solutions to enhancing communications in a remote-first or hybrid work environment. It provides guidance for acquiring the skills, services, and equipment such as Astound's fiber-rich network and Virtual Office Kit to create a remote employee experience that parallels the experience of those still commuting to the workplace.



WELCOME TO THE NEW NORMAL

It wasn't long ago that working from home was a concept foreign to most corporate workers. Sole professionals like accountants and lawyers, writers, artists, and field-based salespeople had home offices; most everyone else endured a daily commute to the office. That was where work got done, where the boss held meetings and mentored the team. It was where the phone rang when customers called, and where clients came for presentations. What happened?

First came technology enablers that allowed people to stay in contact and share information remotely. Collaboration solutions like email and texting were quickly joined by group messaging apps like Slack and Google Chat. Smartboards provided a digital canvas on which connected colleagues could brainstorm, share, and edit documents in real time during remote meetings. Applications like Office 365 and OneDrive literally put everyone on the same page of every file. Video conferencing solutions like Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Zoom exploded in popularity. Suddenly it didn't matter where employees worked, as long as they were connected.



Work-life balance and rising commuting costs were contributing factors in some companies experimenting with work-from-home initiatives, but many managers resisted the trend, skeptical that unsupervised employees would be as productive working remotely as when in the office. An Owl Labs survey found nearly 60% of managers feel remote work is robbing them of opportunities for informal leadership development and to mentor team members.²

Then the pandemic hit, leaving management no choice. Almost overnight knowledge workers were quarantined, locked down, and isolated. This forced companies to accept the concept of remote workers, to enable them with the tools to work from home, and to trust that employees would self-manage their time and responsibilities accordingly.

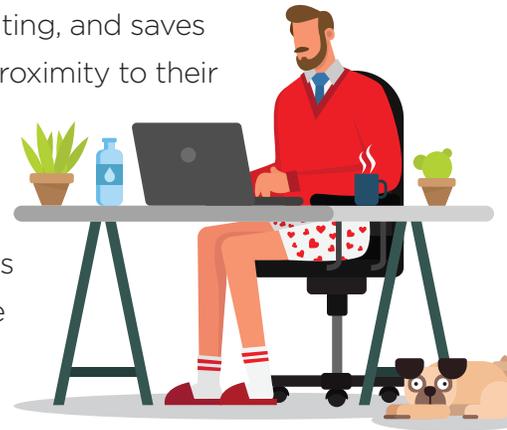
Remote Work By the Numbers

- An Owl Labs study found **70% of full-time U.S. employees are working from home during the current Covid-19 pandemic**. Most do not intend to return to pre-pandemic work settings, with **half of respondents saying they will seek future jobs that offer remote work, and 23% of saying they are willing to take a pay cut** if they can continue to work remotely some of the time.²
- Companies save **\$11,000 per year per part-time remote worker**, on average.⁷
- **54% of employees say they'd leave their current job** for one that provides more flexibility, especially in the area of remote work, and **83% of workers would prefer a hybrid work model in the future**.⁷
- **Only 20% of IBM's U.S. employees are in the office for three days a week or more**, and the company does not see a scenario where the balance ever gets back to over 60% of its workers in the office.⁵
- A Statista study found **83% of companies say collaboration on new projects has been as good or better** than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷
- A McKinsey & Company study found that developed economies are able to have their **workforces spend 28% to 30% of their working hours remotely without any loss of productivity**.²
- A Bloomberg survey revealed **84% of employees say that not having a commute** is a top benefit of working remotely.⁷

After some initial stumbling caused by the sheer speed of the work-from-home transition and users learning to navigate new messaging technologies, a funny thing happened: people liked it. Managers found they did not have to micromanage employees in person, and employees found they could be just as, if not more productive working from home. Today, many organizations promote their remote-first or hybrid work policies as advantages in the hiring process.

So, here we are...or aren't. Welcome to 2022 where knowledge workers are spread across different geographies collaborating as if in person, only coming into the office when necessary.

For employees, a remote or hybrid work schedule has some great perks. It minimizes the time, expense, and carbon footprint of commuting, and saves on business attire. In fact, proximity to their workspace and household amenities can make employees more productive. Remote workers are more likely to get to the office early and stay late when it's only a few steps away. They often eat at their desk and rarely take the full lunch hour. The flexibility to take breaks or complete projects after hours greatly impacts work-life balance and job satisfaction. Especially for those with youngsters or dependents at home during the day.



Employers have learned they can expand their talent search to anywhere on the globe, make better use of freelance talent, and reduce overhead by downsizing the square footage of leased office space or shuttering offices permanently.

The acceptance of remote work has caused a permanent shift in the landscape of today's business environment. There's no going back to pre-pandemic behaviors; remote-first and hybrid work environments are here to stay.

Want proof? Some very large, well-known organizations are experiencing a great deal of pushback (and generating negative publicity) after issuing mandates that employees return to the office. After two-plus years of working remotely many employees have embraced their new work-life balance and will leave a job if they cannot continue to work remotely or at least on a hybrid schedule. It's called the *Great Resignation*. In fact, Department of Labor statistics show that over 12.7 million people quit their jobs in July, August, and September of 2021⁸, in large part because they could not continue to enjoy the newfound freedom and flexibility of remote work.

As a result, businesses need to use multiple messaging platforms to promote effective communication among remote employees to enable them to achieve their goals. These methods should foster inclusion to create a sense of belonging and help increase job satisfaction and employee retention, but not to the point of overload. The overall objective should always be focused on ensuring clear communications.

COMMUNICATION **CHALLENGES** OF A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT



Work doesn't happen at the same time for everyone, especially in national or global organizations. Today's world may be uber-connected and always on, but that doesn't mean that your employees should be accessible 24x7; everyone deserves a break. By the same token, that doesn't mean employees should miss important discussions or decisions because they are offline or live in a different time zone.

Some people will take advantage of the lack of supervision, confirming managers' worst fears of work-from-home policies. Others are never off, always working to exceed expectations before eventually succumbing to stress and self-induced burnout.

Remote work is not for everyone, but it may not be a choice. Some thrive, becoming more productive, enjoying the flexibility and independence. Others cannot set boundaries between work and leisure time, falling victim to distractions and interruptions from pets and family members, or developing bad sleeping and eating habits.

Some employees struggle without exposure to in-person training, mentorship, and leadership. Some suffer feelings of isolation and prefer the camaraderie of coworkers. Others fear working remotely will slow their career progression, believing the lack of a physical presence in the office will somehow diminish their worth to the organization. Then there are a few who cannot return to the office due to compromised immune systems of the employee or at-risk family members at home.



When we think of some of the pitfalls and challenges to effective communications in a remote-first or hybrid work environment, here are some things to consider no matter where your employees fall on the spectrum of embracing the work-from-home model.^{1,2,3,4}

- **A lot of the current group messaging tools and project trackers (Slack, Google Chat, Basecamp, etc.) become fragmented over time and harder for users to follow a growing number of channels and threads.** Employers should pick one or two solutions and stick to them. Provide training to minimize potential frustration by end users who may not have exposure to these tools, and monitor the endpoints to ensure all users are using the same apps and updated versions to avoid compatibility issues.
- **Intent is sometimes confused in email chains or chat threads.** It can be hard to determine tone in written communications; readers misread the message or infer a certain emotion that was not intended. There can be confusion in the back-and-forth of email responses, perhaps missing one or two in the chain, or mistakenly being left off the cc: list. The use of emojis, although not considered professional for external communications, has become more commonplace in internal digital communications, and should be encouraged to confirm intent in situations where tone could be misinterpreted, like sarcasm. Still not sure how your message will be received? Pick up the phone.
- **Consider that individuals who changed jobs during the pandemic may never have been in the office or have yet to meet colleagues face-to-face.** This may impact the employee's ramp-up time, as they have less access to resources and no first-hand exposure to company culture or "how things used to get done in the office." The lack of in-person introductions may also slow the new hire's acceptance by other team members, or make the new hire feel uncomfortable speaking up in remote meetings. Managers should extend a warm welcome to remote hires, provide time for personal exchanges during team meetings, and encourage new hires to speak up and connect with others offline.
- **There is a need for secure remote audio-visual communications.** Video conferencing allows for more than face-to-face communications. It improves comprehension of complex topics and allows participants to pick up on body language and non-verbal gestures. A visual connection builds faster relationships with new introductions (see above). But Zoom, Teams, and other public cloud video conferencing solutions are not secure.



While not every conference call will involve strategic decisions or proprietary information, companies should not take the chance that competitors or agents working on their behalf are not listening in. Other closed-loop/private cloud video conferencing solutions like T1 lines provide secure point-to-point communications but require specialized hardware and support a limited number of endpoints. Dedicated lines are expensive to install, and businesses cannot cost effectively connect every remote worker to the corporate network, especially companies with hundreds or thousands of remote employees spread across different geographies. Businesses should investigate the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to ensure secure communications for remote employees.

- **Lack of formal records of virtual meetings.** After everyone hangs up, what's next? Some applications offer the ability to record remote meetings but that does not address the creation and distribution of meeting notes, action items, and assigned tasks. Some businesses use electronic whiteboards or smartboards as a digital canvas to brainstorm, edit documents, and speed group decision making. With or without the use of a smartboard, organizations need to find ways to codify the knowledge-sharing process that takes place in traditional meeting formats for remote attendees. Meeting leaders should assign roles for centralized note taking and action item tracking before the meeting begins and establish channels for distributing identical meeting notes and tasks to all attendees.

Without some of these guardrails in place, remote workers can feel isolated and out of touch. According to research, feeling a sense of belonging is important for driving employee engagement and going the extra mile to solve a customer problem. Igloo Software's 2020 State of the Digital Workplace Report found that 80% of remote workers reported feeling left out at some point in their remote employment.¹

Hybrid and remote-first work cultures pose challenges when it comes to fostering inclusive employee experiences. Companies just transitioning to these models may be unaware of some of these implications on their employees and managers alike.



COMMUNICATION **SOLUTIONS** FOR A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

Something fundamentally new to working in a hybrid world is to ensure that employees feel a sense of belonging, catered to, and part of the decision-making process no matter where they're located geographically.

Not long ago you could build camaraderie with team building exercises, staff retreats, after-work happy hours, or even just a birthday cake and song in the break room. Need to call an impromptu meeting? Everyone was right there.

Not anymore. Today's employers must consider the full spectrum of employee experiences when creating company-wide policy for both in-office and remote workers; no one likes to be left out.

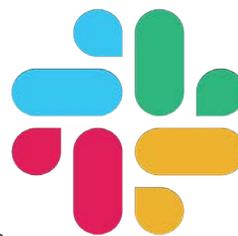


Here are some tips to ensure remote workers feel like a part of the team: ^{1,2,3,4}

- **Set clear expectations for remote work policies.** Are workers required to be at their desks from 9 to 5, or is it “as long as the work gets done”? If working across multiple time zones, designate a common period when all team members must be available. Make sure employees know whom to contact in case of an emergency, and what forms of feedback are expected and welcome. Communicate key performance indicators (KPIs) and the metrics used to score them clearly and reward employees that are performing above and beyond expectations.
- **Ensure critical communications and meetings are conducted during normal business hours.** Minimize contact outside of working hours; allow remote employees to have boundaries and dedicated downtime. You wouldn't schedule a meeting at 8pm for in-office employees after everyone went home. Extend the same courtesy to remote workers. While the occasional after-hours text due to an emergency or a late-light epiphany is acceptable, managers should avoid excessive communications outside of working hours, especially for non-essential tasks.

- **Use scheduling tools to invite attendees with RSVPs and provide ample notice for meetings.** “I wasn’t there,” “I didn’t know about the meeting,” “I missed the call” leads to dissatisfaction, disconnection, and eventually disengagement. Make sure everyone is aware of the meeting, can attend the meeting, and that their participation is important.
- **Schedule individual check-ins.** Take the time to speak to remote team members privately where they can express any concerns freely. Learn how they are faring working from home, and if they need any type of additional support.
- **Provide allowances for home office infrastructure.** If the company provided a workspace and business tools for employees in the office, consider a reimbursement policy for supplies, furnishings, and equipment to offset the expense of setting up a home office, especially if it is the company’s decision to move to a remote or hybrid work environment.
- **Avoid unnecessary supervision/employee surveillance.** There are several tools available such as live webcam monitoring or virtual timekeeping apps that allow managers to monitor remote employee activities. However, excessive use of these technologies can make employees feel spied upon and untrusted. Consider moving towards goal-oriented KPIs instead.
- **Implement reliable means for feedback.** “I just get emails that tell me what to do,” “I feel left out of the process,” “I didn’t have a say”. Communication isn’t just about *how* teams communicate with one another, it’s about giving employees a voice in process and policy. The most important step forward is to make sure remote workers have a way of speaking up and are comfortable in doing so.

Organizations considering a transition to hybrid work practices must enable methods of communication that foster inclusivity and employee equity at team and company-wide levels. Provide group messaging tools like Slack, Skype, or Google Chat for real-time communications. Schedule team meetings for debriefs at the conclusion of a project for input on how processes could be improved next time. Use cloud-based tools like Office 365 and SharePoint to allow multiple employees to work on and share the same version of a document.



Equip remote employees with a VPN. Protect vital company information whether sharing a document via email, updating a customer database, or discussing strategy on a conference call. VPN software hides a user's IP address, encrypts data, and routes it through secure networks rather than the public cloud. Available through many providers on a subscription basis, VPNs enable remote workers to communicate confidential information safely without the expense of a direct connection to or worries of a breach in security of the company network.⁶

PARALLEL THE IN-OFFICE EXPERIENCE WITH ASTOUND

To maximize the effectiveness of a remote or hybrid work environment, management must find ways to ensure remote employees' daily work experience matches or parallels the experience of those who continue to commute to the workplace.

A remote or hybrid work policy is about more than employees taking their laptops home for the night. It's about communicating and collaborating in real time, with all team members using an identical toolkit, and doing so securely.

Toward that end Astound Business Solutions offers a full suite of technology products and services to enhance your hybrid and remote work environments.



Astound's modern fiber-rich network stretches coast to coast across 12 states, taps into over 100 data centers across the country, and serves seven of the top ten U.S. metropolitan markets, so we can connect your remote workers to the corporate WAN for highly reliable, high definition remote communications from virtually anywhere.

To streamline and unify the equipment used to enable work-from-home communications, Astound offers its **Virtual Office Kit**, a turnkey VPN solution that provides a secure, robust, and highly managed network experience for remote employees. Rather than using internal IT resources to cobble together the pieces to equip remote workers, the Virtual Office Kit is preconfigured and contains all tools to deliver a secure cloud-based connection to corporate servers for a remote experience and accessibility to people and data equal to those of in-office employees. Virtual Office gives IT personnel a window into the remote user's work-from-home environment to offer support and fix problems as if they were in the office.

Eliminate the challenges of enabling clear, secure communications among remote employees. Contact Astound to learn how we can help implement the technologies that will make your remote workers feel connected and part of the team.

SOURCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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