

SUMMER 2020

Remote Communications Guide for Project Team Leaders

REMOTE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

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Project Background

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all Cornell University project teams halted in-person meetings on campus. This **dispersion of team members** all across the country and the world made it nearly impossible to continue to work on each organization's project. Over **one-third** of all Cornell Engineers are members of project teams, where their teams represent both academic and social communities. The inability to have in-person meetings presented many impediments to team **communication** and **collaboration**. From personal accounts as well as survey results, we can conclude these circumstances have challenged everyone with many unprecedeted situations. This new reality has also presented limitations on in-person meetings, thereby **necessitating** new **communication guidelines** for **dispersed project teams**.

Who Should Read This Guide

The purpose of this guide which outlines effective virtual communication practices is to offer suggestions to Project Team leaders who are facing challenges of remote collaboration with their teams.

Readers should expect to learn about what tools can be used for effective online collaboration, how to promote a thoughtful virtual environment, and what the key points of productive discussions are as they navigate through the guide, as well as how to tailor the outlined points to their team.



Facing Challenges of Virtual Communication

We currently see teams **struggling** to find worthwhile collaborations in **virtual environments**. Working remotely brings challenges such as **fragmented communication, insufficient visibility** and **accountability**, and **technological interruptions** [1]. In some cases, working remotely can cause elevated states of “computer-mediated **anxiety**” [2], and this anxiety only exacerbates the already-impaired teamwork. As team leaderships scratch their heads to find ways to improve the productivity of their dispersed project teams, we believe our work can serve as a good **resource** for all Cornell Project Teams.

“It was difficult to tell if people were listening or **tuning out**, and there were **silences** when we asked for questions”

“No “**water cooler**” effect. Information often gets shared through non-formal channels... It is difficult to share all relevant information through formal channels only”

“It was hard to coordinate **multiple time zones** and accessibilities.”

“Meeting **attentiveness** was at an all-time low.”

“People don’t respond promptly because they are **not motivated** to do work remotely.”

“It also can be hard to keep track of progress or get things done because of the **slow response time**”

Above are quotes collected via survey from various project team leads at Cornell (See Appendix A)

Utilizing Practical Communication Tools

As a part of our **survey**, we examined what online tools are most used by Cornell project teams. The survey focused on **six types of collaboration platforms**: email, team messaging systems, video meetings, drives, instant messaging, and project management applications. For each type, we asked our participants to indicate how important it is to their teams in remote work. To **quantify** our results, we followed a scoring system as shown below:

Very Important = 4;

Important = 3;

Semi Important = 2;

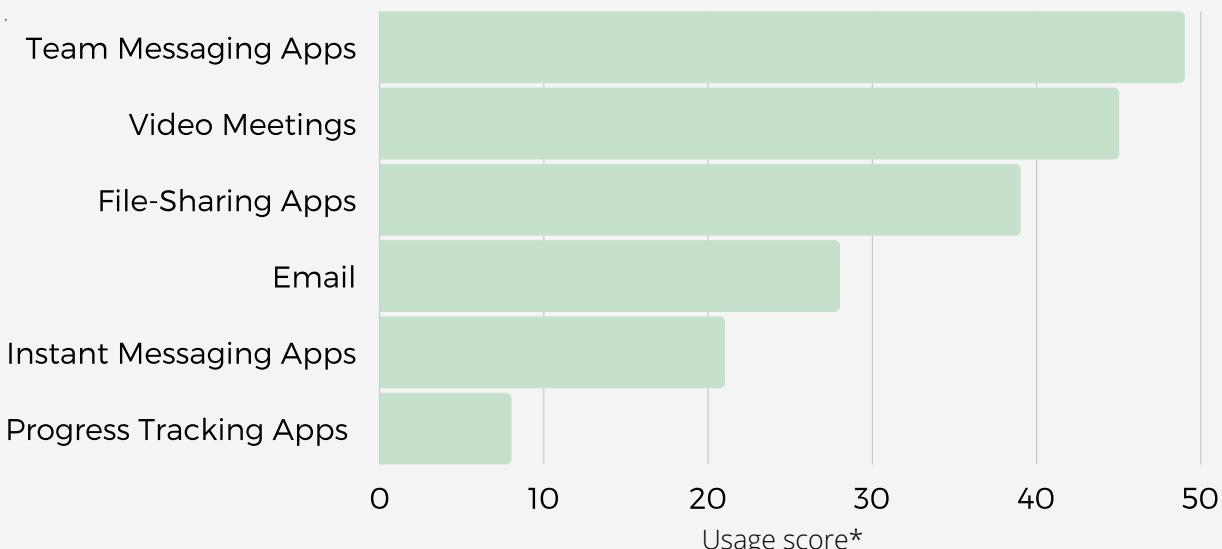
Not Important = 1;

Not Used = 0;

We **sum the responses to generate usage scores*** and plotted results on the graph below (see Appendix B). We found that the most used online tools are:

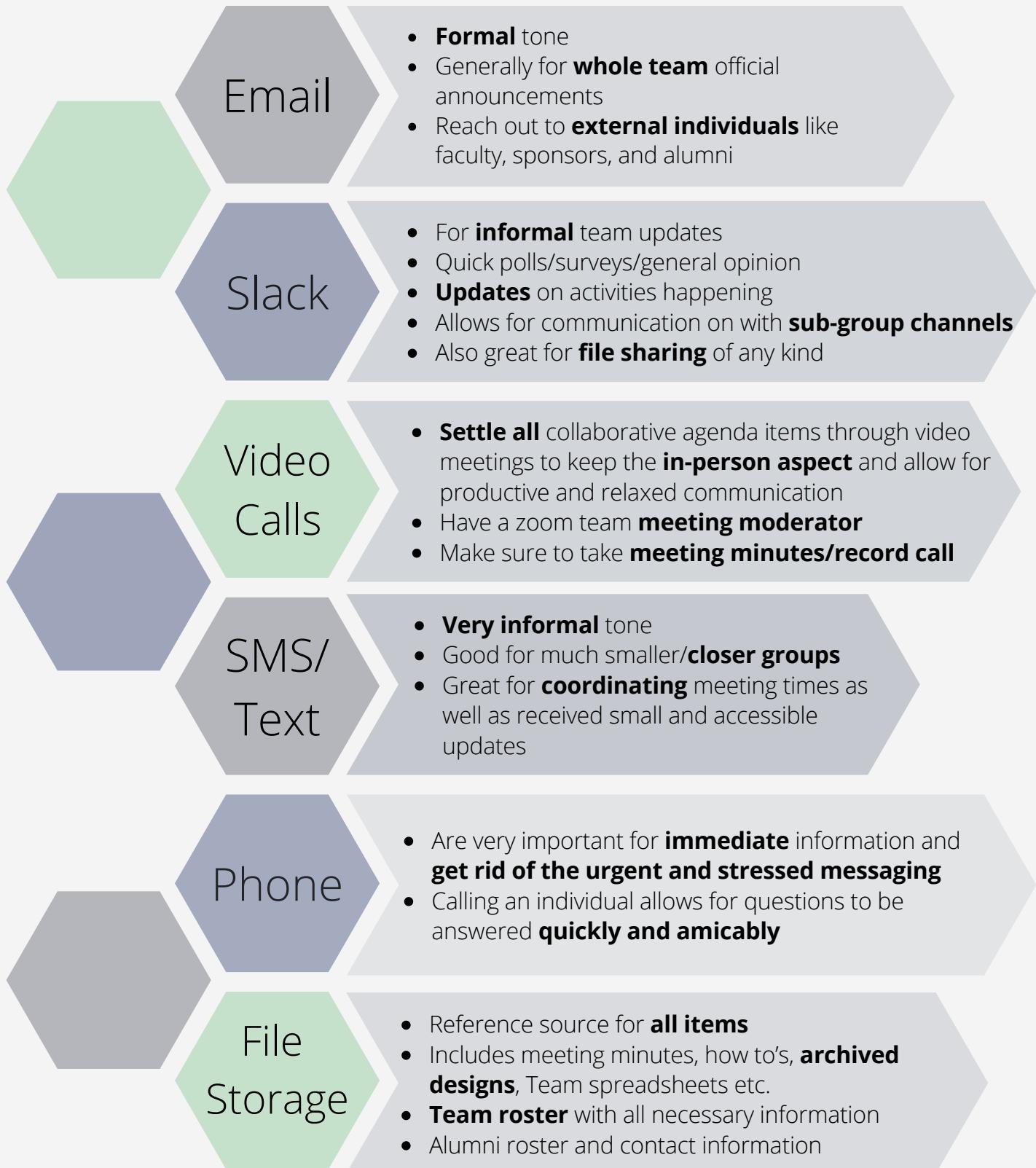
- Team Messaging Systems such as **Slack**
- Video meetings applications such as **Zoom** and **Google Meet**
- Collaboration Apps such as **GSuite** and **OneDrive**

Graph I: Cornell Project Teams' Most Used Virtual Collaboration Platforms



User Guides for Collaboration Tools

These are the tools identified by many project team leads as being the most used platforms.



Ways to Effectively Use Online Tools for Team Management

This section will provide recommendations on how Cornell Project Teams can **optimize** their **virtual collaboration** through the use of online tools. Instead of focusing on the technicalities of each platform, this guide offers **seven ways** in which team leaders can **utilize** and **combine features** of communication platforms to find **technological solutions to management problems**.



1 Use slack to its maximum potential.

Slack was voted to be the most popular platform among Cornell project teams, so it is important for any team to know how to use Slack efficiently. Some best practices and ideas are as follows:

Depending on a team's size, structure, and demand, each channel can be dedicated to **either a specific subteam or a defined task**. Channels can be **sorted into sections**, as seen in image 1.

Clearly identity the purpose of each channel clearly upon establishing it, and encourage active participation.

If there is a message that everyone in a given channel needs to see, broadcast to the entire channel using "@channel".

Create a separate channel for fun things, and actually use it. (For more about building team culture, see the section, "Cultivating Positive Team Culture").

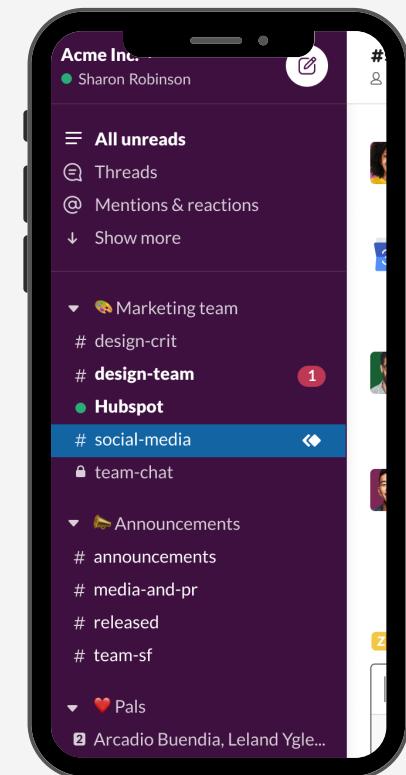


Image 1: This good example of utilizing channels and sections in slack.

Having trouble creating channels? Check out [this Slack Guide \[3\]](#) by Super Slack.

2 Increase team participation through utilizing multiple online platforms.

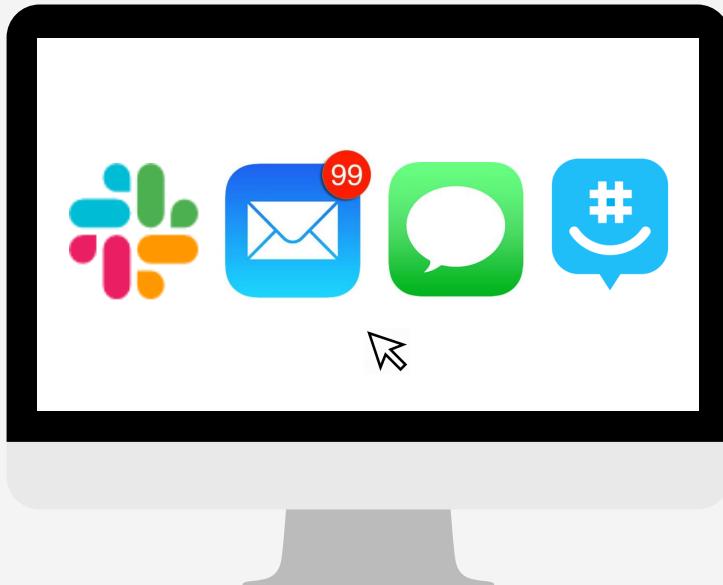


Image 2: Having multiple forms of communications help shorten response time.

According to survey responses, reaching team members is one of the most prominent challenges for team leaders across different teams. To overcome this barrier:

Make email chains for the whole team as well as for each subteam.

Use friendly and concise language in emails. Have a descriptive email title, and bold or highlight appropriate information if applicable.

Use Slack private messages. **Have team members turn their private message notifications on.** If they do not want to be bothered early morning or late at night, Slack has a feature that allows people to set notification schedules so that they will not be disturbed during resting hours.

Obtain team members' phone numbers. Instant messaging and calls are especially helpful in emergency situations or in scenarios where someone is unresponsive to other forms of communications. This also ensures **deliberate communication redundancy** [4].

Of course, getting responses in a timely manner also requires an overall sense of accountability. How to achieve that? Check out the section, "Facilitating Productive Online Collaboration".

3 Schedule regular meetings and work sessions using online polls.

Having a regular meeting and work session schedule helps integrate project team meetings into team members' routines. Synchronous remote work promotes a sense of visibility and accountability, which can improve productivity [5]. To do so:

Use When2meet or Doodle Poll for surveying availability. Doodle (shown in image 3) is great for scheduling work shifts, while When2meet is great for meetings. Both platforms produce **shareable links** that can be easily pasted.

Encourage everyone to indicate all available times even when certain times are not preferred. Team members can **leave a note at the end of the survey to express preferences**, and their preferences will be considered.

Use both Slack and email to send the survey to those who need to fill it out because communication redundancy is indispensable for remote work [3].



Image 3: his picture demonstrates how a team members can easily fill out the availability survey in When2Meet. The team's collective responses are shown on the right side of the screen.

Continued from previous page

After a meeting or work session time is set, **send out calendar invites through email and Slack**. This way, once team members accept their invites, the meeting time slots will automatically be in their calendars.

Zoom can be integrated into Slack. When integrated, team leaders can **start Zoom meetings using simple commands**, illustrated in image 4. Slack will alert team members in the corresponding channel.

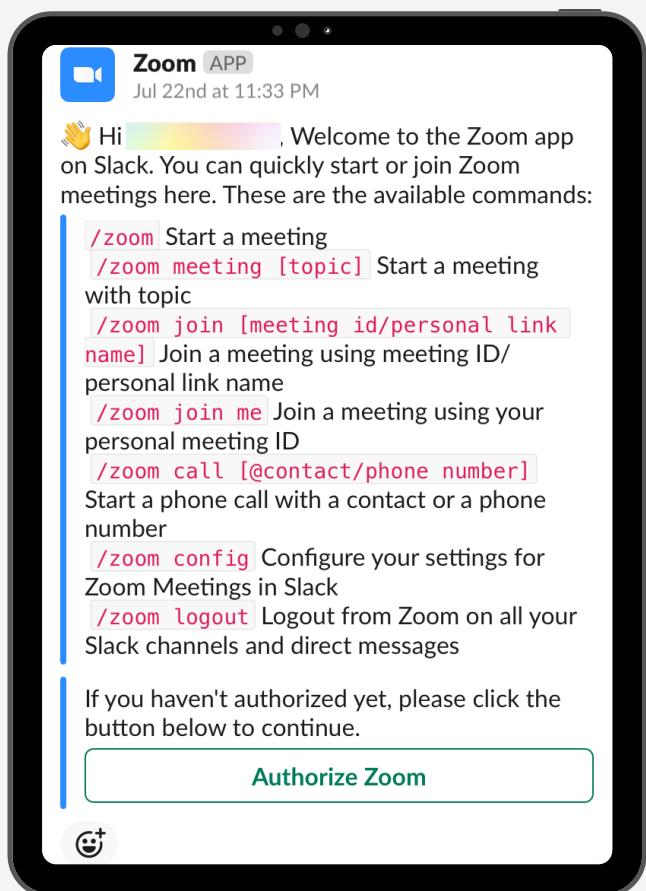


Image 4: Those are the key commands for using Zoom through Slack

4

Get into the habit of recording meetings.

Whether it's technological issues or scheduling conflicts due to geographic dispersion, recording meetings allows everyone to stay updated asynchronously. Regarding recording Zoom meetings:

If Zoom is integrated into Slack, the default setting will **automatically record every meeting** and post the recording to Slack right after the meeting ends.

To further keep records of meeting contents, **take minutes** on a Google Doc. Team members can engage with meeting materials through comments.



Organize documents and project materials for easy file sharing.

Good organization makes it easier to navigate file-sharing platforms. Although naming and arranging files takes time, in the long run those practices will save everyone time when an old file is needed:

Create **separate folders by school year**. Within each folder, make additional folders **for specific functions**.

Create a **superseded folder in every task folder** to store older versions instead of deleting them because older versions may be needed as references at a later point.

Establish a **sensible naming convention** for files.

Bad File Name:
Drawing6_recover.dwg

Good Naming Convention:
PartName_netID_mm-dd-yyyy_VerX.dwg

Make time for a **ten-minute weekly checkpoint** for people to ensure that all files created during the past week were named **properly** and **uploaded** to correct folders.

Color-coded files dedicated to various aspects of the team is good organization practice.

Google Drive, Box, and OneDrive can all be **integrated into Slack**, which will automatically notify team members when changes or comments are made in a shared file.

Google Drive also comes with G Suite, which offers more ways to facilitate virtual teamwork. To find out more, [click here](#) [6].

6

Make use of a project management application.

Currently, survey responses show that most teams underutilize or do not utilize project management platforms like Trello and monday.com. Those platforms facilitate task delegation and progress monitoring [7]. Here is what they can do:

<p>Arrange project boards by tasks, like image 7 shows. On each board, customize its visibility, sub-tasks, assignments, and deadlines. As tasks are completed, task receivers should promptly update the status of their tasks.</p>	<p>Both applications can be integrated with Slack, so task receivers can get Slack notifications in addition to the emails automatically sent out by the project management systems.</p>	<p>The automated “nudge” function in both Trello and Monday.com is not free, but monday.com allows university teams to apply for free pro features. Here is the <u>link to the application</u>.</p>
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Source	Type	Comments
Facebook	Link to HP	0
Twitter	Link to HP	0
Pinterest	Link to blog	0
Facebook	Link to webinar	How to
Instagram	-	Photo
LinkedIn	Link to blog	0

Image 6:: Monday.com makes task management easy and less time-consuming.

Getting used to Trello and monday.com can require a slight learning curve. To find out more about Trello, [click here](#) [8] to view a tutorial. Curious about Monday.com? [Click here](#) [9] instead.



Do not be afraid of Git or LaTex.

Although some software teams already use Git and LaTeX, the programs can actually benefit more teams. People tend to Git and LaTeX require many technical skills, but they are not as intimidating as people believe. They can benefit a team in the following ways:

Git allows team members to **collaborate on code**. As shown in image 7, Git users can checkout code from a repository, modify the code, and commit changes back to the repository.

Take professional-looking notes and make technical documents in LaTeX by writing a set of commands. Team members can also collaborate on LaTeX using websites such as Overleaf.

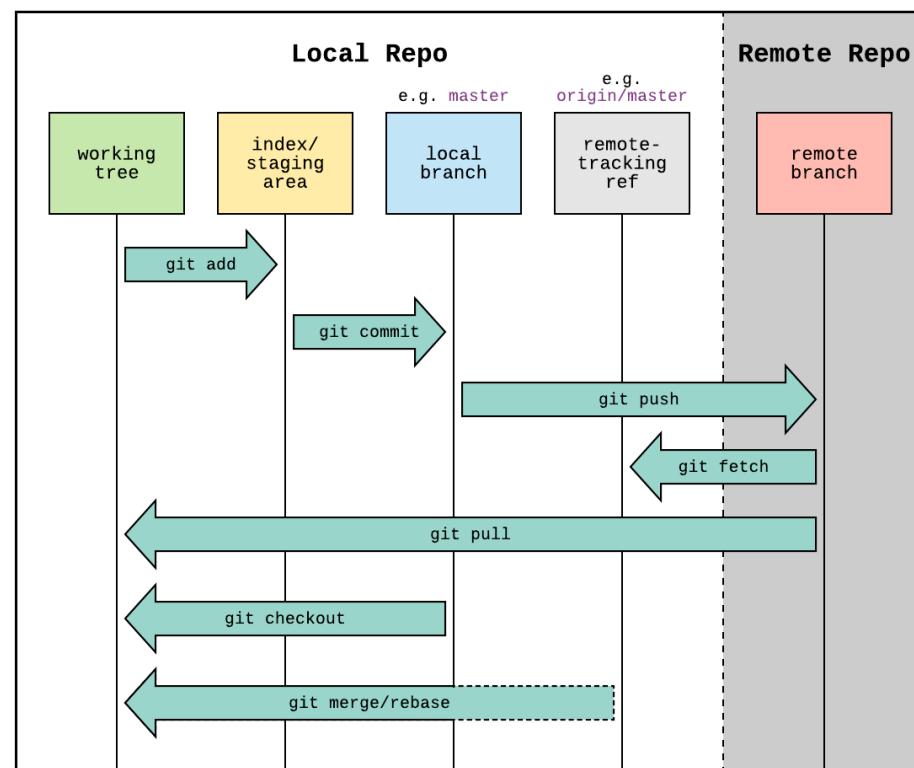


Image 7: This workflow demonstrates how team members can get started on working together on Overleaf. To learn the basics of Overleaf, here is a guide.

Want to know more technical details? Look at Image 8 to understand the workflow of Git, and see this [Git guide](#) [10] and this [LaTeX guide](#) [11].

Cultivating a Positive Team Culture

Cornell project teams act not just as a space for technical and professional development, but as a social group as well. While the lack of in-person meetings has led to numerous logistical issues, the loss of a supportive group of peers has also been detrimental. An environment where **friendship** and **trust** are central allows for a space of **strong communication and productivity**. Project teams that cultivate a strong culture will more **easily communicate** and **be productive**, while working virtually and in the future.

Code of Conduct

Establish an agreed upon **code of conduct**, outlining the **best team practices** and **conduct**. By having clear guidelines on how to act and communicate allows for a far **more productive** team and a team that is **comfortable** with one another.

Leaders Establish Outline

Leaders should gather before the semester starts to outline a clear code of conduct and establish expectations

Presented to Team and Revised

Code should be presented to the entire team at the beginning of the semester. Get Suggestions and revisions.

Entire Team Follows Code

Code should be followed by all members of the team, leaders should be an example as to how to abide by the code.

Professional Development

To promote **positive team culture** your team should provide opportunities for **professional development**. These events make team members aware that you are **dedicated to their individual success** both during school and after.



Team Inclusion

It is incredibly important to promote a team environment where individuals are **not afraid to share opinions** and are **proud of who they are**. A good way to do this by facilitating a culture and team environment where **everyone feels included** and accepted.

1 Have real conversations
about how race, gender, socio-economic status, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and any other diversity topics that relate to members' project team and college experiences

2 Facilitate a team Structure
with a relatively flat organizational hierarchy, meaning underclassmen have access to leadership positions

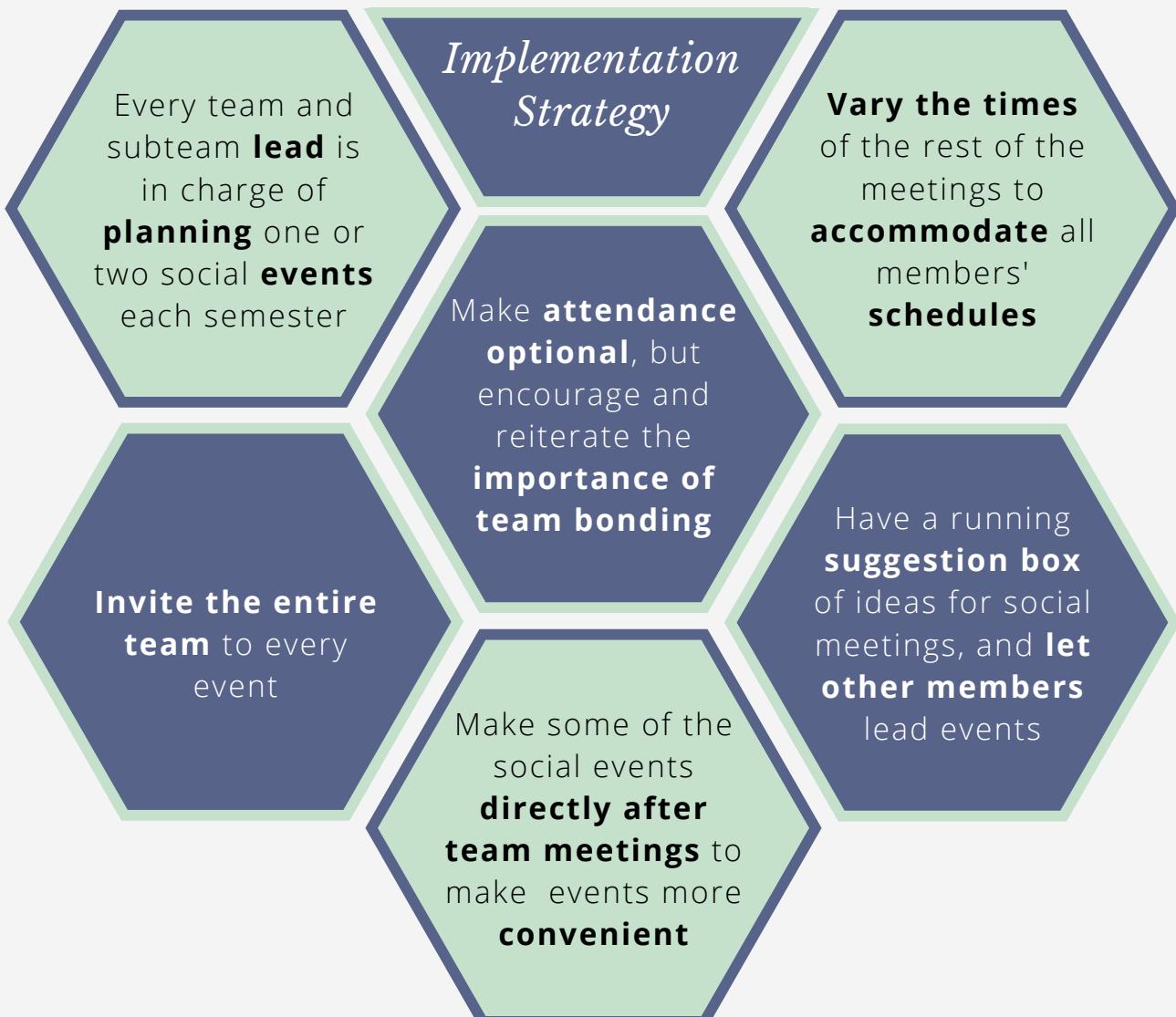
3 Embrace a team
where the best idea wins, no matter who it comes from

4 Reinforce the importance
of asking questions, where asking for help or clarification is never a bad thing, but can be seen as one if inquiry is discouraged

5 As a team leader
it is important to acknowledge your position of power due to being a team lead or on the executive board as well as any other positions of privilege

Virtual Social Events and Gatherings

In addition to technical, general body, and sub-team meetings, incorporating social gatherings is important in **establishing a team culture** and forming a peer group, rather than just a project team. This period of time has been taxing to everyone, providing a **lighter environment** where team members can reflect on their weeks or be distracted from their realities is important in **fostering team communication and collaboration**.





*Click on event to see online guide

Mentorship

To promote **team unity** and **cross-grade interaction**, implement a strong mentorship and sponsorship program on your team. This type of program will vary significantly by project team but is a great way to promote a **positive team culture**.

Once new individuals join the team, **partner** them with an upperclassman, who will act as a **mentor**

Facilitate **partnership** through common major or potential **career interests**, rather than subteam

Encourage virtual **coffee chats** to form **relationships** between mentor and mentee

Facilitating Online Collaboration

With the in-personal aspect of communication absent through the computer screen, it is important to create a **structure for navigating through team objectives**, specifically one that enables fluid remote collaboration. This section of the guide will provide general structures for how to easily **progress** through **team agendas, online meetings**, and elaborate on team **conflict and conflict resolution**.

To begin each team leader should internalize the following concepts to effectively make progress on their team:

Establish a **chain of command** for responsibilities and leadership as well as for conflict resolution

At the very first meeting have an **on-boarding process** that explains which communication tools to use for what so there is no confusion

Always go into a meeting with a **plan or objective**

Make sure team leaders have a **progress tracking** chart of some sort

Every member should be conscious to **go out of their way** to be **considerate** and **understanding of** each other

How to Ensure Productive Virtual Meetings

Have an **agenda** shared before the meeting begins

Set aside 5 minutes of the beginning of the meeting to **ask how everyone is doing** - personal check up

Annotate the agenda and turn it into the **meeting minutes** as the meeting progresses

Update your team on any changes and receive updates on everyone's role and update **progress tracker**

Have members **volunteer for** or have the lead **delegate** any new responsibilities

Ask if anyone **needs help** or **guidance** for their roles and **schedule next meeting**

Ways to Avoid Team Conflict

Team conflict can result from a many number of issues. The best way to avoid conflict escalation is by having a **strict code of conduct** (see page 14) as well as established **general conversation expectations**. Many components of these two areas fall under the responsibility of the team leads as they hold more authoritative power on settling issues and influencing team dialogue. This section will walk through **preventative measures** to avoid **conflict escalation** as well as present a guide for how to **amicably settle disagreements** of any level. Some general team conflicts and their preventative solutions are:

Common Conflict

Someone is at fault for **not doing their part, doesn't tell anyone**, and it holds the team back

Preventative Measure

Importance of **accountability, communication, and delegation** for each member must be understood at the very beginning

A **personal grievance** between members creates a huge argument over a part design or project idea

Professionalism should be enforced and the members should **come to terms** with a **mediator** if necessary

Someone causes tension because they rudely **reject ideas** without reasoning

Encourage **open dialogue** that consists of **constructive** navigation of ideas: just saying "**No**" or "**I disagree**" is **not** an argument

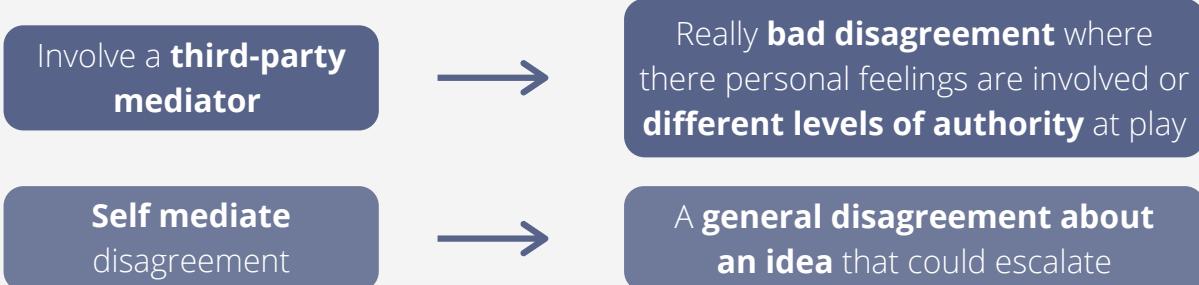
There are **numerous issues** with a member and they **refuse** to change or amend their ways

Have **repercussions** established day one and **follow through** - Project Team participation is a **privilege not a right**

Conflict Resolution

To resolve a conflict, it must first be made clear what the disagreement is **about** and what the **setting** it is in. The steps created are from personal experiences from working on project teams, evaluating what methods worked. The **perspective** of this guide will be that of someone **personally involved** with a disagreement of what to do on the team that could escalate [*order of steps may vary for specific applications*]:

Step 1: Evaluate if a mediator is necessary.



Role of a Mediator:

Document ideas both parties are advocating for to have as much **clarity** as possible

To be **bi-partisan** and make sure **both parties feel heard**

Clarify the situation and **de-personalize** the disagreement by focusing on the topic

Step 2: Establish what the disagreement is really about.

Re-state what the disagreement is about - Often disagreements are a result of **miscommunication**

Ask questions to clarify both sides that are specific to the **established topic** of disagreement

Examples of clarifying questions:

"So what you're saying is ... because of concern?"

"And just to be clear, I am advocating for ... resolution, because of ... reasons and ... personal experience"

"Oh, what I am trying to say is because of budget restrictions"

Step 3: Come to a decision on a resolution.

Conflict is resolved through **clarifying disagreements**

Both sides **agree to disagree**, **document** both points, and move forward with **majority vote**

Final call on decision will go to the **person who is in charge** of its implementation

Everyone involved must accept final decision made and let go of personal disagreements

Appendix A

This spreadsheet entails all of the free responses from the survey sent out which asked:

- What was a problem you faced when virtually communicating with your project team during the Spring 2020 semester?
- What other platform(s) does your team use, if any? How do you use them?
- What aspect of virtual communications is most important to your team?
- If there is a virtual teamwork or communications strategy that worked well for your team, would you please share it with us?

Link:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1MBqko094Bozu5T_539eYpnhTvbeRlpUL2j9C28Mp-Y/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix B

To calculate the responses for the amount of use of each of the survey responses we allocated number values on a scale from 0 to 4 and summed up the totals for each online application for the visual. This link will bring you to the page where we formatted and calculated the values for.

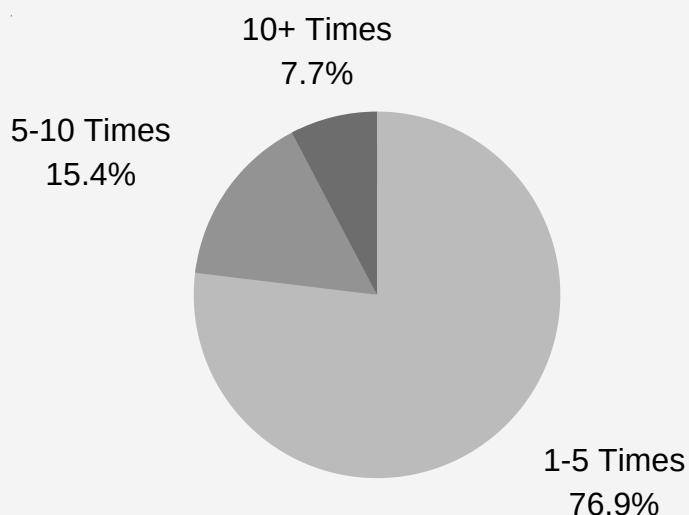
Link:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XR6tR-am8kY46rHpWGL33XAHzebPillpPlxL9b8ayMY/edit?usp=sharing>

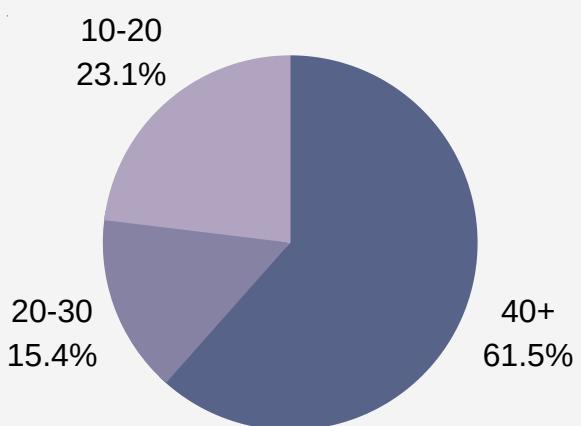
Appendix C

A total of 13 project team leaders responded to our survey. Here are some demographic statistics about them.

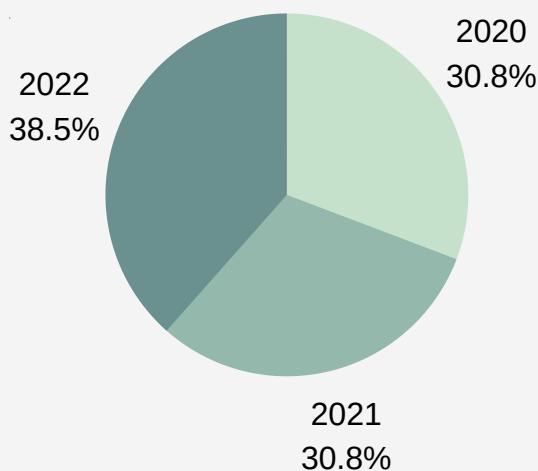
Team Virtual Communication Frequency (per Week)



Represented Team Size (Number of Members)



Graduation Year



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