

Building Remote Connections

Nicholas Meeker Salinas

Jake Hahn

Vanessa Ruiz

Kyle Moses

Janette Fattouh

St. Edward's University

MGMT3334

November 23, 2020

Professor Dunn

Executive Summary

St. Edward's University student consulting group

Background

Covid-19 brought an unprecedented time, and since beginning to work remotely in March, Austin Resource Recovery (ARR), has searched for ways to increase connectivity among teams, virtually. ARR is successfully trying to transition the connectivity that was once shared in an office setting to each of their employees's homes to create a positive environment.

Research Methods

Primary data was gathered from interviews with the Division Manager and Business Process specialist and through a survey created by our team. Secondary data came from feedback sessions that ARR had conducted in the prior weeks to our contacting them. This includes the leadership series affinity chart data from program Managers, division Manager and Supervisors along with Division Retreat Focus Groups.

Concepts and Theories

Theories from the Essentials of Organizational Behavior textbook were analyzed to understand what's occurring within the division. These theories emphasize the importance of finding ways to stay connected and helped us to create recommendations for ARR.

Analysis

Of the twenty employees surveyed, 55% said they were likely to take initiative in planning a virtual event and carrying it out. Sixty percent of responses said they were likely to attend the virtual events hosted by other team members. Additionally, 70% of respondents said they were likely to participate in one on one professional development with fellow employees. Overall, responses show that high levels of desired connection are present.

Recommendations

Our team recommends that Austin Resource Recovery implements one on one professional development calls so that new employees may network with those who have experience with the organization. Next, Our team recommends implementing employee lead virtual events for the team to participate in. This is an opportunity for team members with an event idea to make it happen.

Background

As we near the ten month mark of facing a global pandemic, major organizations are continuing to seek improvements in operating virtually. Austin Resource Recovery (ARR) began working remotely on March 13, 2020 with practically no time for preparation. This organization is part of the City of Austin and is responsible for the collection of trash and recycling. The specific division we are working with is a team of thirty-four individuals who find ways to encourage recycling throughout the city. Prior to the pandemic, employees were on a schedule of having one work from home day a week, as needed. However, there was a major shift when the entire team began working remotely for forty hours a week. Safety was at the top of the priority list, next was making sure that everyone had devices to work off of and access to their work. For ten months leaders within ARR have worked hard to adapt to changing conditions and provide the best support for their team.

After settling into the new working regime, the division manager began to implement ways for the team to interact. For example, on Thursday mornings, a video conference call is open for virtual coffee time. Around 15-25 people will pop into the call and hang out. The manager also sends out a weekly “round-up email” to her team, giving updates, celebrating birthdays, and even including what’s going on in Austin. The team is currently using Microsoft teams as their internal communication platform. Within this platform, there are pages, similar to a facebook feed. The team has a “just for fun page” where they can post life updates, share something funny and interact via comments.

In speaking with the strategic initiative division manager, Gena McKinley, and business process specialist, Natalie Rodriguez, we discovered that there is a search for more ways to keep employees connected in a remote environment during a pandemic. As public servants in the City

of Austin, the division has a budget of close to zero for things unrelated to work. Employees have been affected by the repercussions of the virus and are not likely to risk exposure. With these limits in mind, the goal is to create more connections during COVID-19 and remote work days. Our recommendations aim to create closer relationships between coworkers, in a productive and fun manner.

Research Methods

In our introduction video conference meeting with Gena McKinley and Natalie Rodriguez, we discussed what practices the organization already had in place as well as what they were looking to improve. Our group received secondary data from Ms. Rodriguez on retreats that ARR had conducted in the weeks leading up to our initial contact with them. This included leadership series affinity charts from program managers, division managers and supervisors as well as Division retreat focus groups. The questions asked at these retreats were directly related to connectivity during the online setting. How ARR received this data at the sessions was through a website called Miro, which sorts the employee response into a sort of affinity chart using virtual sticky notes (see Appendix A).

In the meeting Ms. McKinley also informed us that, since the start of the pandemic, five new employees have joined the team. She expressed wanting to connect them one on one with an experienced team member. She also spoke about encouraging the team to take initiative in planning and hosting events. After meeting with the two and hearing what ideas were already possible, we brainstormed how to make them happen. Our group compiled a set of questions that would survey the employees on their opinions of the possible solutions. The survey our group created asked about some of the activities we had in mind for the organization to implement in order to increase connectivity (see Appendix B). Once approved by Ms. McKinley, the survey

was sent to the team and asked to be completed in four days. Twenty responses were received to use for primary data.

Concepts and Theories

One of the biggest challenges is living our real-world lives online. This is causing many employees to feel disconnected from their coworkers and other things that they would normally get to see while in the office. This is where The Hierarchy of Needs theory comes into play.

The social aspect of the Hierarchy of Needs theory is a huge part for employees who are in the dark right now about how to go about their business away from the office. Belongingness can be an issue with everyone that has moved from an office to being completely virtual. This is new to everyone so it does not discriminate and can affect you even if you have been with the company for 20 years. Acceptance and friendship are the next aspects. These are huge for employees that are trying to stay connected during Covid. It is very hard for people to feel accepted when they are not in the office and although hopefully in most cases they are accepted and just don't know it, this could potentially cause some mental health issues. Friendship is also a very tough thing to be going through right now whether it is trying to meet new people or staying connected with old friends. People seem to have forgotten what the world used to be and even forgotten to stay in touch with people. This is very easy to do when you are at home all day and don't feel motivated to do anything other than work or school.

The Job Engagement theory is the next theory that we will be analyzing. This theory has a lot of examples of different kinds of companies and how high Job Engagement is usually seen more in successful companies, but this all starts with how the employee is treated and how meaningful they find it to be engaging. This is determined by job characteristics, as well as access to sufficient resources to work effectively. This can be seen at ARR, because of their low

budget often they can not provide their employees with technology for them to use at home so many employees either have to buy their own, or they are using personal equipment that they already had. Job Engagement can also be affected by employee's stress and attitude, which are both a toss-up with Covid-19, and some employees like working from home more and others hate it and just want to get back to a normal life. ARR can help increase their job engagement by implementing a weekly form that employees complete that lets you know how they are doing in areas such as work pressure, how the managers are doing, and also how are the managers if they are doing a good job or if they could be more involved.

The Job Characteristics Model is another way to analyze employees and how they are being affected by Covid and how some employees are doing better than others and staying connected virtually. This can help ARR to not only how people are feeling about working virtually, but to also see how the job being done is different before vs with Covid-19. The Job Characteristic Model can also help the work employees are doing to be more interesting and intrinsically motivating for them.

Stress management is huge for ARR and so many other companies that are working virtually during Covid-19. We have all experienced stress at some point during the pandemic, and trying to balance your work life with your social life and also trying to keep yourself and your family safe can bring a ton of stress on your shoulders. Stress may seem like just an inside thing but in reality too much stress can cause physical harm to your body including high blood pressure, ulcers, irritability, difficulty making routine decisions, and accident proneness. The physical things can all render an employee's ability to produce the best work they are capable of, and it is the company's responsibility to reduce stress in their employees as much as possible so they can not only be happy at home but also produce for the company. There are many different

things that managers at ARR can do to help with employees stress from moving to completely virtual. Things such as just checking in on employees at a personal level and talking to them can help relieve stress, other ways of helping to connect employees between managers, and co-workers can also help to relieve the overall stress that employees are feeling.

Major determinants to employee engagement is motivation. Giving people the ability to try something new of their own choice can increase employee motivation. Self-determination theory outlines that people have more motivation to do the things that they want to do when they get intrinsic rewards for doing it. Letting people organize their own tasks for no additional rewards other than the praise and positive feedback from their coworkers. Letting people organize a small project for their coworkers that everyone would enjoy and discover new things also leads into self-efficacy theory, which states when people try new things or increase their ability in things they already know their self confidence will increase. When people try new things and succeed or increase their ability, they are more willing to try harder in the future in the same or similar tasks in the future.

Communication is a key to success for ARR. Feedback has to flow downwards and along with plans and goals. Another direction of communication that has to be paid attention to is lateral communication with coworkers on the level of the organization. The professional and personal relationships must be allowed to form laterally so the people of the organization can offer each other support and expertise. But that lateral communication still needs to be monitored regularly to prevent conflicts from arising or getting serious. Digital communication is the main form of communication during the pandemic in most workplaces and personal and nonverbal communication is hampered to a great extent. People must have opportunities to actively say what they are feeling to other people for others to pick up on it. Watercooler conversations and

body language are lacking in most forms of digital communication, so people must be able to have someone to talk to and confide in. Having more frank communication is also important because there is great risk that someone will misinterpret digital communication directed towards them. Having a method to be open with their feelings and thoughts in a more open manner is a great way to reduce stress and notify others of problems in the organization that may crop up in the future.

Analysis

Austin Resource Recovery, Strategic Initiatives Division is a government organization that has to work with various limitations. Those limitations are at the forefront of the analysis of what the organization should do to improve its ability to connect employees together and encourage engagement.

Employees work more productively and are happier and less stressed when they have a certain level of communication between each other. In fact, communication difficulties are revealed to be the one thing that concerns employees the most in comments to Austin Resource Recovery in the employee retreats with 19 mentions. This communication not only needs to happen in an official capacity for their duties and responsibilities but also for their social lives.

Employees regularly engage in social activities before and after meetings, while taking breaks, and even while working. These casual interactions are vitally important for the social health of regular employees and finding ways to create substitutes for those interactions while working distantly from each other is a difficult task. Creating more opportunities for that social interaction by empowering employees to do so is vital. The social interactions don't always have to be games, 90% of employees surveyed want to talk to their coworkers rather than play a game, with 30% showing a clear preference.

The other item of importance is encouraging employees to take the initiative to engage with each other in addition to upwards and downwards communication. This can be facilitated through mentoring, empowering employees to host their own social events for the whole office, and educating employees about the functionality of the tools they are currently using to communicate. Fifty-five percent of employees have said that they would like to take the initiative to host their own social events. Additionally, of all of the employees, 60% would attend social events hosted by other employees.

Seventy percent of employees would like to have mentoring or one-on-one professional development sessions with other employees. Assigning employees randomly to each other will allow employees to find someone to talk to that they might not otherwise interact with and allow junior employees to get advice from someone that can give them another perspective on their advancement. Additionally, this would allow both employees to have a “buddy” that can be confided in, and they will be able to help each other because they will both be more familiar with each other due to increased contact. This can be especially helpful for any new employees trying to integrate with the rest of the group.

Recommendations

After reflecting on theories and analyzing the data, we are providing two solid recommendations with the materials to carry them out. Our team recommends implementing one on one professional networking sessions and team member sponsored events.

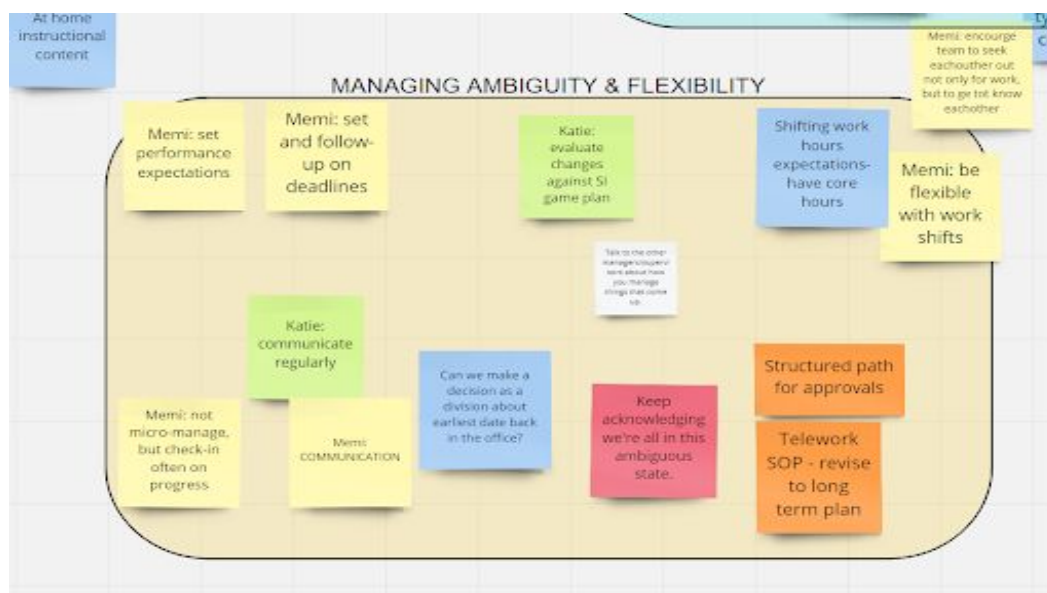
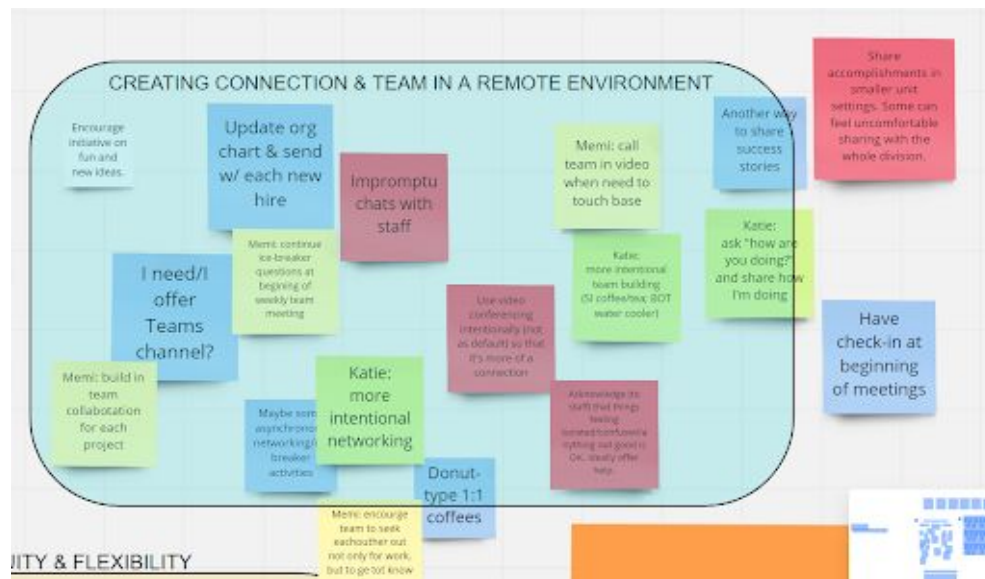
Allowing new employees to connect with experienced employees in a one on one setting will help build personal connections within the company. The goal with these one on one sessions is for employees to learn strategies, ask questions, and network with people who are

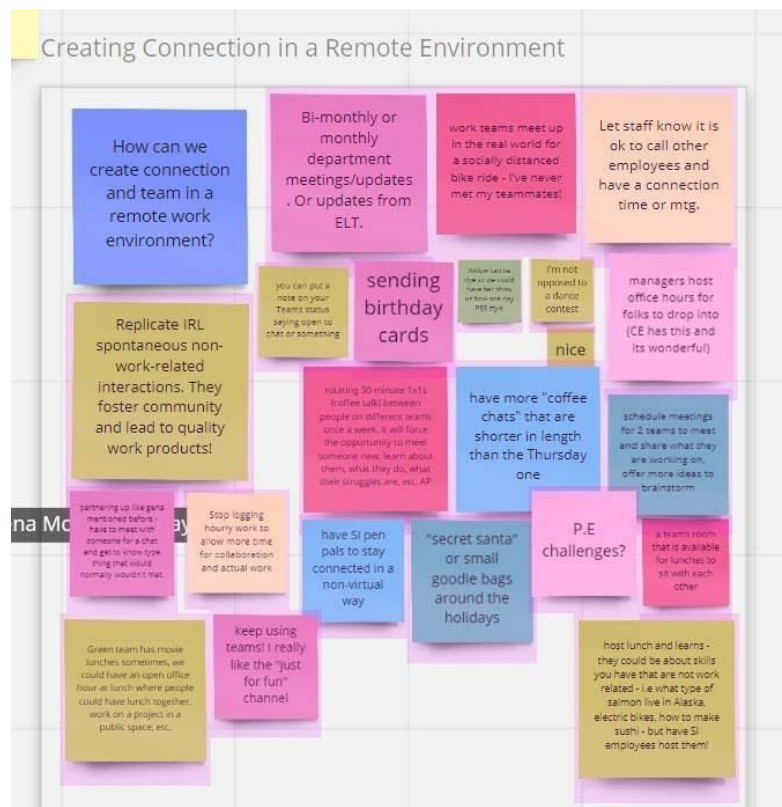
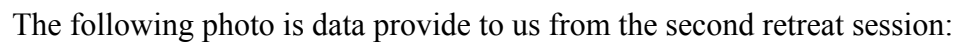
succeeding within the team. A list of questions can be found in Appendix C. These questions can be used to start the initial one on one session. This way of intentional networking should take place once a month. We suggest starting each session by checking in with one another and then using the rest of the time to discuss goals, areas of improvement, and skills to develop.

Next, we recommend employees connecting on Microsoft Teams to host virtual events for the team. Ideally, employees would voluntarily host and participate in game nights either every week or every other week. These events are aimed to create a fun environment for employees to interact and get to know each other. We created a process for team members to take initiative in hosting these events. There are four parts to this process and can be found on the flyer in Appendix D. The steps include the following: having an idea for an event night, filling out the provided pre-event plan, emailing the document to the supervisor and once the event has been approved, advertising the event to the team. We recommend for the pre-event plan document to live where everyone on the team can access it. There are a few ideas included at the end of appendix D to recreate or take inspiration from. Flyers for the event can quickly be made on a website called Canva or the host may simply choose to post the details on the #virtualevents channel. While this is being encouraged, it is also important to ensure that all communication is lightly moderated to ensure that all communications are office appropriate and would not fall outside the lines of decency should they be released. It is especially important for employees to understand this as well.

Appendix A - Employee Retreat Responses

The following photos are data provided to us from the first ARR retreat session:





Appendix B - Survey Questionnaire and Results

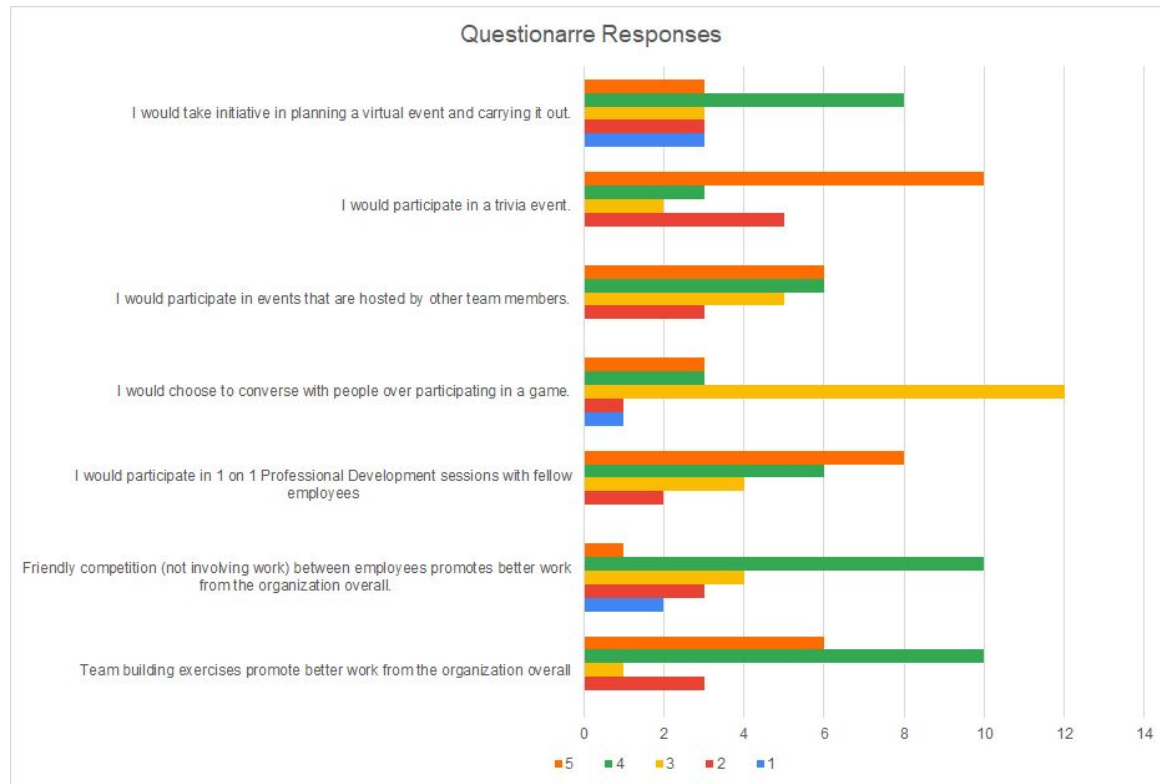
Here is the list of questions that were sent to the employees in our survey ranging from

1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree) sent via Google Forms:

1. Team building exercises promote better work from the organization overall
2. Friendly competition (not involving work) between employees promotes better work from the organization overall.
3. I would participate in 1 on 1 Professional Development sessions with fellow employees
4. I would choose to converse with people over participating in a game.
5. I would participate in events that are hosted by other team members.
6. I would participate in a trivia event.
7. I would take initiative in planning a virtual event and carrying it out.
8. Do you have any ideas for a virtual staff event?

The survey was sent to the employees of Austin Resource Recovery on Nov 9th.

Twenty responses were collected and outlined in the following chart.



Responses for question 8:

- Show and tell, “speed dating” type event to make connections with multiple team members
- painting!
- Virtual meal together, online game (either teams or everyone against the others)
- Something after hours and away from work channels
- Around the house scavenger hunt
- Trivia sounds fun. But only if it is good trivia. I am very competitive with trivia, can you tell? Generally, virtual staff events feel forced and boring. Except for maybe trivia.
- Not off the top of my head...
- Smaller groups are better

Appendix C - Professional Development Sessions

Professional Development Sessions - newer employees meet with more experienced employees

- Give a brief description of what you do on a day-to-day basis
- Give a brief synopsis of career to this point
- List a few goals you have for your career
- Name your favorite part of the job so far
- Give your best piece of advice for the job
- Discuss what topics to cover in future 1:1 sessions
 - Possibly management, communication, leadership, networking, or managing conflict

Appendix D - Pre-Event Plan Template and Example

Want to host a virtual event for the team? Here's how:

Strategic Initiative Devision



1

Have an idea



2

Download and fill out the document below



3

Email document to Gena for approval



4

Make a flyer and post to #virtualevents channel

Pre-Event Plan

Event Host:

Name of the event:

Date:

Time:

Zoom ID:

*Make sure to schedule the call ahead of time

Description of event:

Once you get approval, make a quick flyer on Canva.com and post to the #virtualevents channel on microsoft teams or simply post a description of the event with a zoom ID.

Example

Event Host: Jane Doe

Name of the Event: Trivia night

Date: December 5, 2020

Time: 7pm- 8pm

Call ID: 78299829

Description of event: I will host a trivia night on common knowledge via kahoot. The link to the exact kahoot is:

https://create.kahoot.it/details/general-knowledge-amazing-facts/fee69ff3-9053-41cc-8830-bcfca81418b?_ga=2.96013727.242729901.1605648173-1183004034.1604703508&deviceId=ef425561-8eee-40dc-99c7-5b9f5e6dabffR&sessionId=1605648172729

Everyone will need their laptop to join Microsoft teams and another device (cell phone is good) to join kahoot. Once everyone has joined the call, I will launch kahoot and share my screen with Kahoot code for everyone to join. We will play 3-4 games depending on how long each one takes.

Event Ideas

Ugly christmas sweater contest- Bust out your favorite ugly christmas sweater, make a cup of hot chocolate and join the team for a fun chat about the Holidays and gifting ideas.

Virtual team picnic- Prepare your quickest favorite meal and join the team for a picnic at the table. Discuss

Bob Ross experience- Use what you have around you to follow Bob Ross in creating a masterpiece! Whether it's paint, color pencils, crayons or just pens- relax and follow along to see what you can create. Once complete, present the finished product to the group and discuss the process.

- Directions on how to play video with good audio
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me9Ietooq4w>

Scavenger Hunt: Home edition- Spatula! Candle! white shoe! During this event, the host will call out things for the team to quickly grab around their home. Add a twist by having the slowest person of each round tell a funny story.

Photo hunt- Do you have 1,467 photos sitting in your phone or 24 photo albums around the house? The host will name a kind of photo for the team to find. From your own baby photo to a photo of the best trip you've ever taken.

Among us game night- Join the team in staying hip by playing what all the cool kids are playing- Among Us. Everyone should join the video call and have a cell phone ready. Among us can be found in the app store for free. Create a new game in Among Us and share the code for everyone to join.

Appendix E - Random Group Assignment Guide

The following is a link to a document outlining how to randomly assign people to groups or pairs using Microsoft Excel.

- [How to Randomly Assign People to Groups in Excel.pdf](#)