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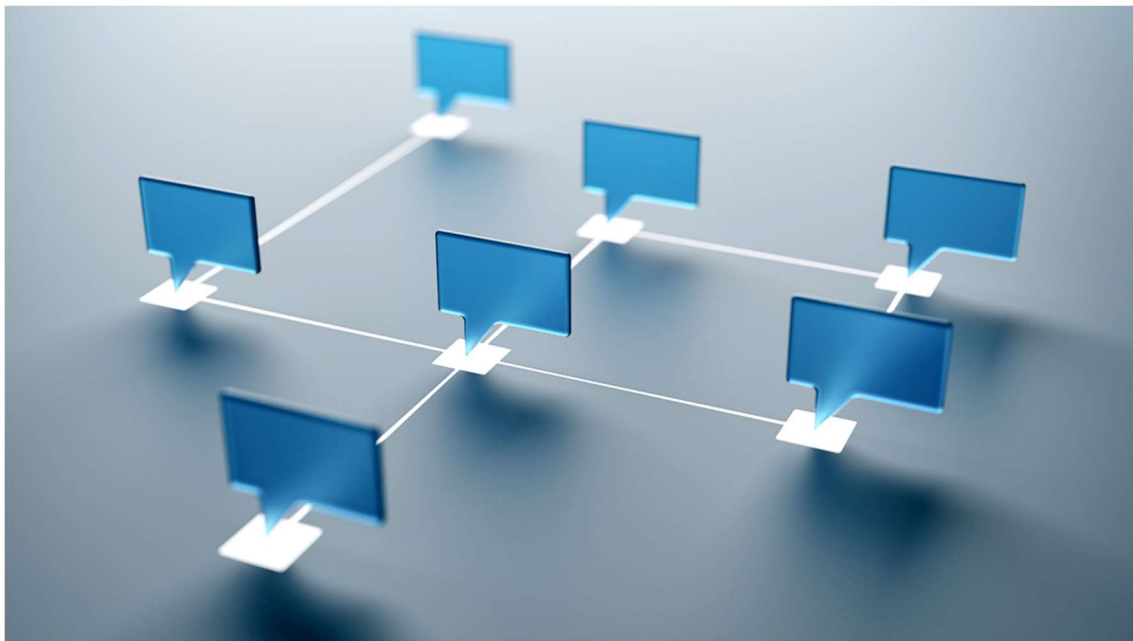
# 3 Project Management Strategies for a Hybrid Workplace

by Alexandra Samuel

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**Summary.** On a hybrid project, communication and coordination become both more critical and more challenging. Digital tools and meetings may be the only way some team members can keep in touch. In the author's experience running dozens of web development and... **more**

Working as a hybrid team can amplify the risks inherent in any project. Every project depends on assembling the right team, ensuring that everyone is clear on what they're expected to

deliver, establishing communication norms, and managing meetings well—but on a hybrid project, those things become both more critical and more challenging. You may have a tougher time getting everyone on the same page. You may have never met some of them in person. Digital tools and meetings may be the *only* way some team members can keep in touch.

A hybrid-savvy project manager can address these issues and even make the dynamics of a mixed team work in the project's favor. Indeed, a recent study found that hybrid work can even boost team trust and effectiveness.

I've run dozens of web development and content projects, and I speak and write regularly on hybrid collaboration. I also recently reached out to project managers who had posted online about their hybrid project work and asked them to share their insights. Based on all of these experiences, I've found that there are three key areas to think about so that you can make hybrid work for you, rather than against you: how you plan and kick off the project, how you set up tools so everyone can use them, and how you use meetings. Let's look at each of these in turn.

## Set Yourself Up for Success

How you handle a project kickoff is especially crucial on hybrid teams, because it determines whether your team members will think of themselves as a single unified crew, or as a series of satellites orbiting around the "real" team in the office. To set yourself up for success:

### Consider logistics when assembling your team.

If most of the project's work is going to be independent, pick the people who will do that work most efficiently and effectively, regardless of location. If a lot of the work is going to be deeply collaborative — and especially, if that collaboration needs to happen in real time — then try to recruit team members who are

in the same (or similar) time zones, or better yet, working out of the same office. That may take a bit of mental adjustment if you're working in an organization that has become so remote-friendly that project teams are determined based entirely on skills and expertise, without considering location.

On the other hand, when you're working on a project made up of discrete tasks that get handed off from one team member to the next, time zone spread can work to your advantage. When Alyssa Gessleman led a tech project for a telecom client, her client's hybrid team got impatient while waiting for project updates from her fully remote, global team. So Gessleman changed her team's communications process to take advantage of their time zone differences, accelerating her team's internal hand-offs so they could update the client earlier each week.

**Clarify terms and expectations.**

When you're running a hybrid project team it's even more important to be absolutely clear on project goals, deadlines and constraints; what gets shared via messaging, or via email; what warrants a live meeting; and what constitutes a true emergency that warrants after-hours contact.

Set expectations at the outset, and plan on regular check-ins that focus on intra-team communication. Keep these norms documented in a form that's easy to update, so that clarifying a fine point for one person also makes that clarification available to the whole team.

Olivia Mitchell Russell, an Atlanta-based event and project manager, says she found the process of expectation-setting was particularly crucial when running projects that included both long-time team members and very short-term contractors with different expectations around things like keeping cameras on for meetings.

## Get Everyone Using the Tools

Just about any project can benefit from collaboration software tools, but when you're running a hybrid project, your software is also your common workspace. As far back as an influential 2005 study of virtual teamwork at Intel, researchers found that choosing a common set of digital work tools — and then using them in a consistent way — contributed to the success of hybrid teams. To make sure that your digital environment is effectively enabling your hybrid project:

### Bring along the reluctant adopters.

It can be hard to get people to use new software platforms, but if you're working as a hybrid team, you can't be held back by one or more reluctant adopters. Virtually any distributed project is going to need online tools that provide for centralized task management), group messaging, online meetings, and a central document repository. You may also need tools to enable virtual whiteboarding, live document collaboration, and so on. Your goal is to pick the minimum number of tools needed to get the job done, and to support people in learning the relevant platforms by providing training or documentation, and sticking with a consistent set of tools throughout the life of the project.

One strategy that can help your team buy into your toolkit, and ease the path for people who are new to some of the software, is to pick your tools together. Alejandro Ferreira, a project manager at Kreitech, likes to include the team in choosing the tools they'll use on each project. His company had no remote employees before Covid, so on their first project as a distributed team, he used the process of selecting project tools as a way to build the sense of belonging that was a little more elusive once they were no longer working face to face.

Asking his team of developers to vote on their preferred toolset meant they ended up with tools at least some people knew well, which meant there was always someone who could provide a little coaching to those who were new to a given platform.

**Enable individual digressions.**

Differentiate between the tools you'll use together and the tools you'll use separately. While it's crucial to specify (or vote on) the tools you'll use for collaborative tasks like drafting documents, you can let people choose their own tools for anything they are working on alone. There's no need to agree on collaboration tools for a task someone is tackling solo.

## Make the Most of Real-Time Work

Real-time meetings can be crucial to getting your work done, clearing bottlenecks and sharing knowledge, but excessive or poorly run meetings can be a source of frustration and resentment, especially on a hybrid team where some but not all team members are meeting in person. A detailed dissection of the patterns of interaction in hybrid meetings found that tech frictions frequently interfere with communications and team dynamics, and proposed that these can be addressed by designing meetings to level the playing field — for example, with a structured process for turn-taking.

 To ensure your meetings are the glue in your project, rather than a wedge between your team members:

**Use meetings with intention, not as the default.**

Hold a kickoff meeting for the whole team, and reserve a regularly scheduled window at least every one or two weeks that team members keep blocked in their calendars in case a meeting is needed. But progress reports should happen outside of meetings,

via email, project dashboard, or group messaging. That way you're not making people attend a meeting just to make sure they're on task — and the updates are documented.

Hold people responsible for reading those team updates by booking a sacred meeting-free window into your collective schedules and requiring some action from them: Let people know they have 4 to 4:30 dedicated to catching up on team updates every day, and ask people to post a clarifying question, suggestion or appreciation for a fellow team member every day by 4:30.

**Use meeting tools that level the playing field.**

To ensure your hybrid meetings don't put remote participants at a disadvantage, build in cadences where you ask each person for input, instead of just letting people jump in when they have something to add. And consider expanding your toolkit with technologies that make hybrid meetings more engaging and inclusive — for example, by incorporating a digital whiteboard.

That's how Emily Picknell, an internal business consultant at Canada's Centre for Remote Sensing, ensured that a staff member in the Northwest Territories could participate just as effectively as team members based in Ottawa. An online whiteboard not only equalized differences in location, it also helped engage people who were more comfortable communicating visually than verbally.

**Tap the power of one-on-ones.**

Not every real-time work session needs the whole team: Sometimes a single point of human contact is a more efficient way of funneling information back to the group.

When Stephen Higginbotham took on a massive infrastructure project that had already failed on 27 previous attempts, real-time individual meetings proved key to keeping the project on track. The project scheduler on his team held regular one-on-ones with remote team members, getting updates on how close their work was to completion, so that the project budget could be closely managed and the project actually completed — with results that saved his company $80 million a year.

**Think of meetings as relationship enablement.**

When so many of us have packed calendars, it's tempting to keep every meeting as efficient as possible — and sometimes, that *is* just what you need. HR sales consultant Zac Mutrux has fond memories of working with a nonprofit where each meeting had a designated time monitor, charged with enforcing the time allocations on a pre-planned agenda. Rotating that role meant no one person had to be the permanent bad guy.

But, fundamentally, your real-time work together is a key opportunity to build relationships and trust among your team members — especially between people who are remote and those who work in the office. So integrate social interaction into your working meetings, and make room for enough off-topic conversation that people have room to engage creatively and build a sense of connection.

Look for opportunities to create connection throughout your meetings, instead of scheduling bonding as a separate, special event. If a dog or cat appears on screen, ask for the pet's name. If someone interrupts their train of thought with an apology for veering off-topic, invite them to complete the thought.

Evo Heyning, a media artist and producer who often convenes hybrid teams to collaborate on creative projects, looks for on-camera clues about her collaborators' offline and non-work

interests. That's most feasible if you let your team know that you're aiming for occasional longer (45-75 minute) meetings, rather than frequent short meetings. (But skip the cutesy team-building activities: Research suggests many employees hate compulsory bonding.)

## Hybrid Projects Are Just ... Projects

If some of these practices feel like they would be well-placed on *any* project, well, you're right! At the end of the day, the challenges of running effective projects simply call us to be more attentive to the subtleties and sensitivities involved in running any project where people are working in different locations (like the different offices of a global company), or with different resources at the ready.  Become a great hybrid project manager, and you'll become a better project manager, period.

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