



The Ultimate Guide to Remote Team Productivity in 2019



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When it comes to the benefits of digitization, people will give you different answers on what's the best thing that came out from dropping the analog life. For some, it's social media, for others, it's increased connectivity. For myself and many others, **remote work is by far the best thing that the world of digital has brought to me.**

I'm not alone in this, as research says that about **70% of employees** in the world work remotely at least once per week. Another study says that **3.9 million Americans** nowadays work from home at least half of their hours.

The reasons for this expansion are many. Employers save on overhead costs such as rent and utilities, while employees avoid the time spent commuting every day and get to work from where they enjoy the most. Among one of the biggest benefits of remote work, many remote employees and employers list productivity.



Source

Despite what employers commonly believe, remote work actually **fosters productivity** instead of turning employees into absent slackers. However, due to many distractions in remote environments, as well as a lack of feeling of belonging to a team, becoming and staying productive can be quite a challenge.

After all, with so many things to do around the house, so many people to see in the coffee shop and so many things to keep your mind occupied, productivity becomes an important topic for remote teams. It will become increasingly so, as more **teams around the globe** ditch the office life in favor of flexibility and a life without commute. Some tech companies that have fully embraced the remote life include Zapier, Toggl, Trello, Buffer and many others.

I've been a content writer/manager for the best part of the past couple of years, and most of that time was spent working remotely. I worked within different teams and structures and picked up a few tricks that will help you boost your productivity as a remote worker, and I'm going to share them with you today.

Of course, I'm writing this piece as a remote worker for Chanty, another great company that supports remote work.

The book is split up into the following chapters:

- Communication
- Project management
- Time management

Let's get started and see how you can become more productive as a remote worker and what you can do to change the way you think and work for the sake of productivity.



Why is productivity an issue?

For many managers and CEOs, running their companies remotely means loss of control. Without being able to see the employees working in their offices in cubicles, how will they know that employees are actually working and not binge watching House of Cards on Netflix?



Source: Dilbert

Actually, you can't tell that for your office workers either. All you know is someone is looking at their screening, being seemingly productive. In fact, research suggests that out of 8 hours spent in the office, only **about three hours** are actually productive. The rest is spent reading news websites, browsing social media, looking for new jobs... Anything but work.

On the other hand, working remotely actually supports more productivity. According to one study, **65% of remote workers** stated that they are more productive in this work regime.

Communication

By far, one of the most important elements to productivity in remote environments is the communication. Since there's no interpersonal reaction as you would have in an office setting, remote teams have to find a way to communicate effectively. Luckily, there are a range of tools at your disposal to choose from, and a myriad of ways to adjust them specifically to your team and situation.

Establishing communication guidelines

Without [clear guidelines](#) in place, you'll end up with communication disarray and team members will be hindered by communication, instead of it actually improving productivity. As part of your company handbook, make sure to establish which channel gets used for what kind of messages.

For example, project updates are best left for the actual project management tools, since they will be lost in your team chat app or emails. Similarly, don't use your team chat app (I use Chanty) for conveying extremely important information, as it will get lost in a sea of other messages that the team exchanges every day. Even though Chanty has an excellent Search feature, I avoid sending anything too important through the app. Finally, important matters and client meetings should be done through video conferencing.

Here's what a good communication pipeline for remote teams should look like:

- Team chat app for every-day messages about ongoing processes
- Project management tools for project-related discussions
- Email for important matters where decisions have to be made
- Video for important team meetings and meetings with clients

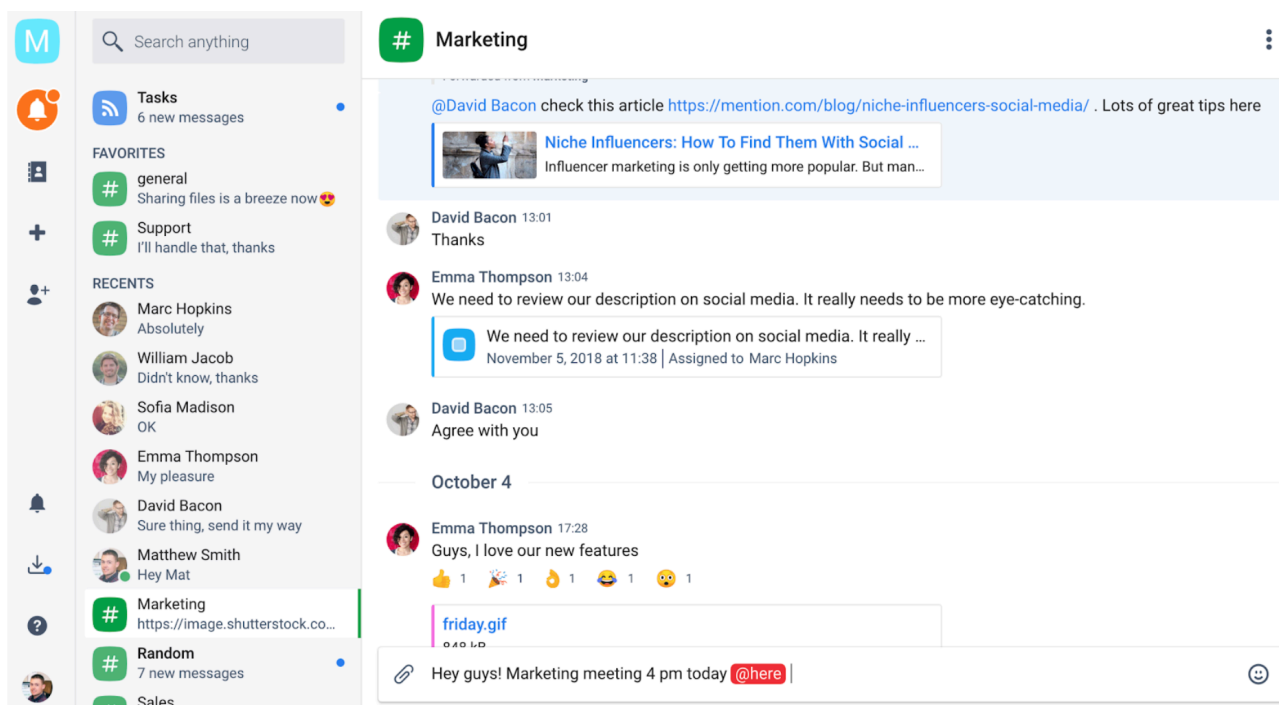
Of course, your ideal setup for communication could be much different, depending on the type of company, the number of people and where they are located.

Investing in proper tools

Hand in hand with communication guidelines, every remote company should establish the tools they use to communicate. Around ten or so years ago, you couldn't be blamed for using tools such as MSN or Skype for communicating with your remote team. However, as working remotely spread rapidly, this allowed a growth in communication tools catering to remote companies and workers. With this in mind, there's no excuse to using Skype, Facebook Messenger or some other platform for communication at work.

Let's start off with your team chat app, as it is the most important tool for staying in touch with your team. With the boom of Slack, teams around the world recognized that chat apps were a much more convenient way to communicate than by phone, going around the office or sending countless emails. When chat apps were improved with integrations, things became even better.

Even though Slack is the major player in the team chat app arena, **it's not the only one** and there were many others designed for the needs of remote and in-house teams. With Chanty, the aim was to create an alternative to Slack that was easy to use, looked great and had no limitations for free users.



A screenshot of what Chanty looks like in action

When it comes to video conferencing, there's a host of tools available that make it easier to hop on a call. Even though Skype is an option, it's hardly a robust solution for larger remote teams where it's necessary to have many participants in a call.

At the end of the day, there's only so much you can do through communication alone. To get any meaningful work done, your remote team needs a project management solution, and chat apps and email can hardly cut it. This is when you need to start searching for a project management tool.

Mind what you say and how you say it

There are numerous elements of in-person communication that are hard to replicate in writing. Some of these include body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, the volume of your voice and many others. Until you're left without them, you won't realize just how much of a difference they make in everyday communication.

Why is this so important? Since most of remote team communication relies on text, messages often get misinterpreted, which can cause [conflicts in the workplace](#). It's not unusual for minor disagreements to scale up to full-fledged conflicts that make work impossible.

Since all you have is writing (for most of the time), it's important to think twice before sending out a message. How will the other person interpret it? Will they pick up some additional meaning from it which you may have not intended? Before hitting 'send', make sure that your message is as clear as possible. If something is really important, use audio or video instead of text to avoid any ambiguities.

Watercooler moments

Besides the regular work-related chatter, your remote team needs to have a place where they can discuss non-work related topics. This can be a channel, a group conversation, a thread, whichever your team chat app supports. Your team members can discuss sports, everyday topics, hobbies, pets, whatever comes to mind.

The reason why this is important is because remote workers need a place to bond and really get to know each other outside of work situations. In offices, these are called watercooler moments, because workers would huddle around the watercooler and chit chat about random topics. Unfortunately, these aren't so easy to replicate in remote environments.



Source

For this reason, it's important to have an outlet where remote team members can be themselves. Not only will it foster a more positive work atmosphere, it will also help build company culture, which is incredibly challenging with remote teams.

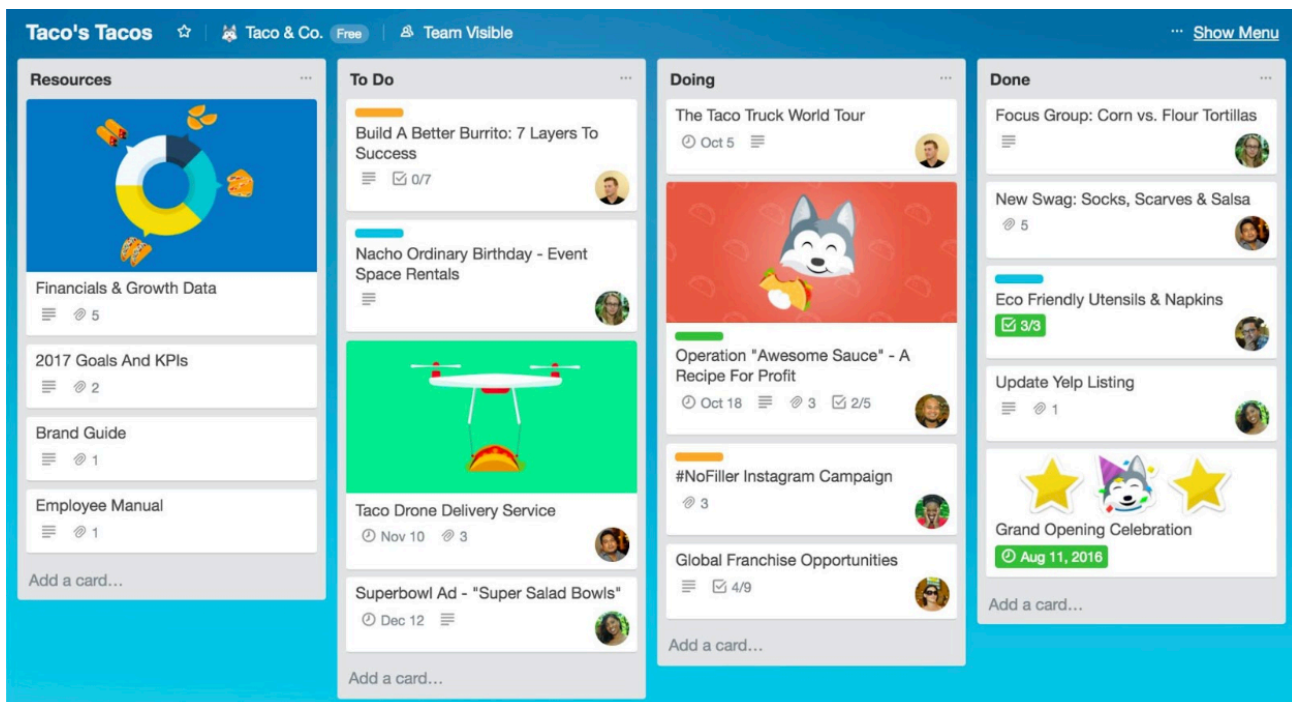
PS. If you're looking for a great tool to improve your remote team communication, make sure to try out Chanty for free!

Project management

Besides communication, the second most important aspect of remote work is project management. This is the process of identifying the stakeholders, processes and timelines needed to perform everyday tasks. In other words, it's about who does what and when it needs to be done.

Why you need a PM tool in the first place

Even in traditional workspaces with everyone huddled in the same office or building, some sense of structure is necessary, and it's not unusual to see these teams using project management apps. In remote environments, establishing the right process, stakeholders and collaborations is absolutely crucial.



A board in Trello.

- **First challenge - communication.** As already mentioned, team chat apps are a necessity for efficient communication in remote environments. However, communicating tasks that need to be done through these apps is not efficient - messages often get drowned in the bulk of other information. This is why PM apps are used to communicate task-related information.
- **Second challenge - time zones.** If you and your buddy from the marketing department are 12 hours apart, things will get lost in your team chat app and you will need an effective way to communicate task-related messages without major confusion.
- **Third challenge - collaboration.** No matter what type of work you do, there are very few tasks that can be done alone. Often times, work challenges require collaboration with your team members or even across teams. One of the easiest ways to work together is by using a project management tool to assign roles, check up on progress and ensure that everything is going according to plan.
- **Fourth challenge - transparency.** If you've ever worked in a remote environment, you've probably [felt out sometimes](#). You have no clue who's working on what and whether the project has just started or about to finish. A project management tool helps remote teams stay up to date - the marketing team can check on where the developers are, the designers can see how the copywriters are doing, etc. In essence, everyone can have as much or as little insight into others' work as the workspace administrator thinks is suitable.

Choosing a project management tool

No two companies function the same and have the same internal structure and processes. With this in mind, there is no one size fits all solution for project management either, and you'll have to do some research to find your ideal app/solution.



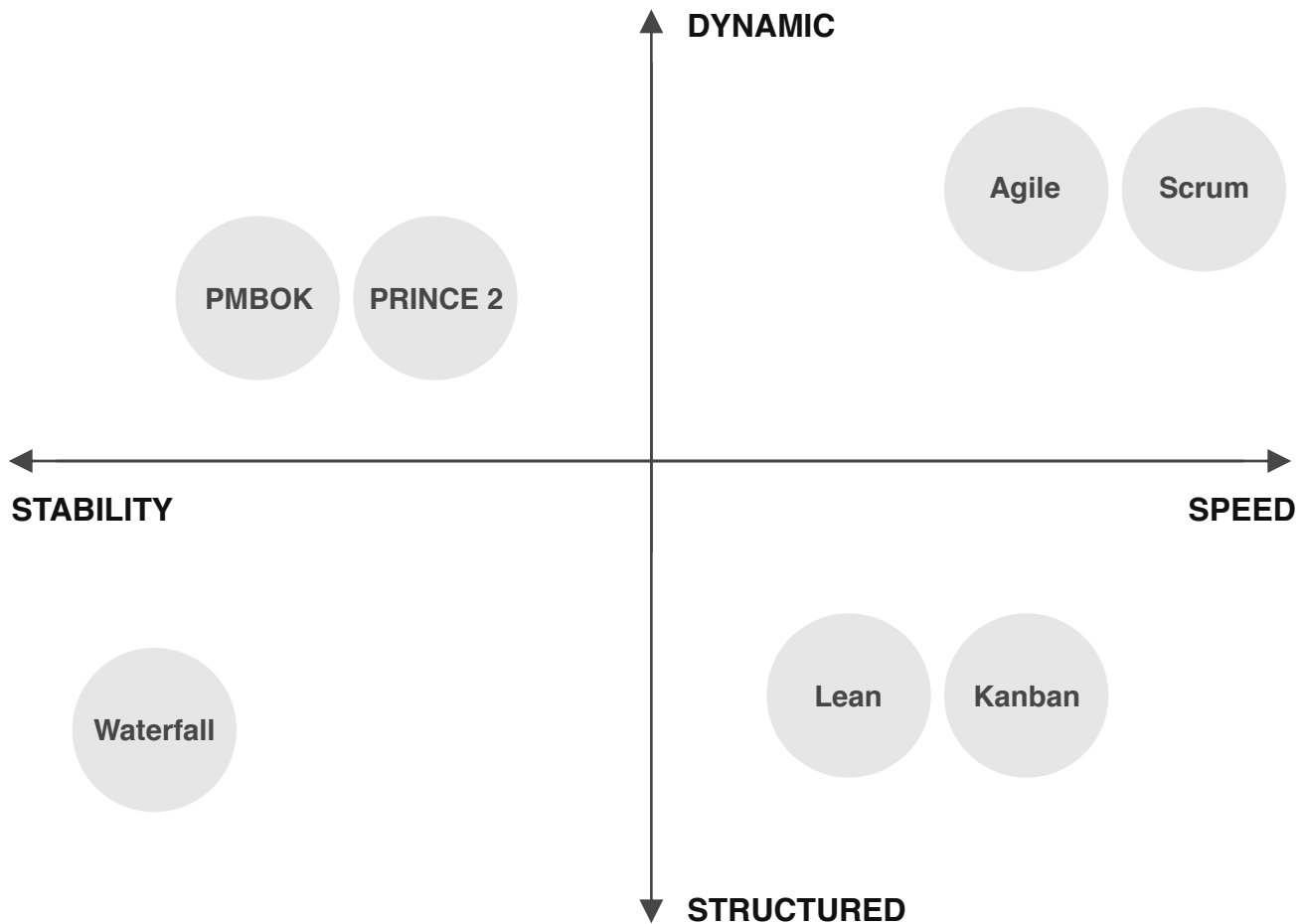
Step 1

Evaluate your needs

If you're not using a project management tool for your remote team already, this is where you look into different options and choose what you think would be best. If you're already using some sort of PM tool, determine what you don't like about and search for an alternative.

Depending on how serious you are about your PM needs, first you'll look into methodologies - the way that project management tools function. Some of them include kanban, agile, waterfall, scrum and others. Note that the most popular PM tools are based on the kanban principle, i.e. a board with cards which are moved through columns.

Project management methodologies



Source

Some of the most popular solutions in the market right now include Trello, Monday, Asana, Basecamp, Jira, Teamweek and many others. The project management tool market is fairly crowded, but as IT and remote teams are growing in numbers across the world, there are pretty strong chances that you can find your ideal tool if you do some digging around.



Step 2

Take it for a test drive

If you've picked out a couple of project management tools, you can take each of them for a test drive and see how they perform. Each of the tools mentioned in the previous paragraph comes with a free plan, so you don't have to worry about locking yourself in an annual payment plan and regretting it later on.

Your remote team members may have previous experience with a certain tool and show preference for it, but this is by no means the best basis for selecting your ideal solution. As mentioned, there's no ideal solution for all teams, so it's up to you to figure out what works for your company and work processes.

I've used quite a few project management tools in my remote career and I can't state my preference for any of them specifically, but overall I've found my coworkers the happiest with Trello, as it's very easy to set up and use. In Chanty, we currently use Jira and I'm quite happy with its functionality, although it's evident it was not built with marketing teams in mind.

Pricing

One of the major elements to choosing your remote team's project management tool is how much it will dent your budget. If you don't have a large team and you don't need too many integrations, Trello is by far the best choice with its free plan and unlimited number

of boards you can use.

On the other hand, think about the amount of money your team is saving by working remotely and invest it into a project management solution that is catered specifically to your business model.

In the end...

A project management tool cannot replace a good communications system or workflow. It can, however, make remote work easier and ensure that distributed teams are all on the same page when it comes to what is being done and who does it, as well as the overall progress. This leads us to the final piece of the productivity puzzle - time management.



Time management

If you ask someone who's never worked remotely about how remote workers manage their time, you'd get a range of different answers. However, research has shown that remote workers are actually more productive than those in the office. One of the reasons for this is that due to lack of distractions, they tend to focus more on the task at hand and get the job done more quickly and efficiently.

However, things can sometimes go to the other extreme, as we'll show in a minute.



Spending too much time at work – or not enough

It's not unusual to hear of remote workers with [symptoms of burnout](#). It often happens that as you work remotely, especially from home, you forget the boundaries between work and free time. Instead of clocking out at 5PM and forgetting about your phone, laptop and work, you end up checking your email, opening your team chat app, replying to just one urgent email... And before you know it, 8 hours of work per day easily turns into 10.

Then there is the other end of the spectrum, [the procrastinators](#). They have a pile of projects waiting for them to complete it, and they leave everything until the last minute. Instead of going through them at a slow, leisurely pace, they have to do a large chunk of work in a short time period. This is especially easy to do in remote environments when there is no direct oversight or anyone breathing behind your neck to get your work done. However, it's just as bad as doing too much work, as you end up doing overtime to manage all of your tasks.

Whether you belong in one of these two works or simply need a better way to manage time as a remote worker, the following paragraphs will help.

Track time, for everything

The best way to know how much time you're actually spending at work and how much a certain task will take from your day is to measure it. While some people are strictly against time measuring,

it's a great practice that will let you get immensely valuable insights into how you work.

First, tracking time for work-related tasks greatly helps managers when they assign workload within their teams. If the design team lead knows that it takes about 8 work hours to complete a landing page, they can use this info when assigning tasks in the future, so as not to overload their team and better estimate future invoices and project proposals.

Second, if you work with freelancers or contractors, tracking time is one of the most efficient ways to measure their output and determine how much they are paid. In fact, many time tracking apps nowadays allow you to calculate payments on the amount of time tracked. Finally, if a time tracker is on, it will give remote workers the sense that they are working on a specific tasks, which can make them more productive.

Time tracking apps come in all shapes and forms, with some of the most popular being Toggl, Harvest, HubStaff and Timedoctor. Depending on which kind of functionalities you need, you can choose the ones that suits your needs and budget best. A great way to kill two birds with one stone is to use a Pomodoro timer. The Pomodoro technique implies working in 25-minute bursts, with 5-minute breaks. It's an excellent way for all teams (not just remote) to be more productive and mindful of how they spend their time at work.

Set clear boundaries

In order to avoid burnout and working throughout the day, it's important for remote team managers and workers to set boundaries on where and when they work. There are several ways that you can do this.

First off, using your team chat app, be mindful of when you send messages and to whom you send them, because what is 9AM for you may be 1AM to someone else in another time zone. As someone on the receiving end of the message, make sure you snooze your team chat app notifications during hours when you don't want to be disturbed.

Moreover, your remote company may allow flexible time schedules for employees, which means that even two workers within one time zone can have different times when they are available. To make yourself available, you can use your team chat app and sign in as you start work, change your status to online or share a personalized message, or use some other way to let your coworkers know that you are available.

Physical boundaries matter too

If you work from a coworking space, this section doesn't matter all that much for you. However, if you work from home, it's crucial. One of the most important reasons why remote workers end up working too much is that they can't differentiate their work and free time. However, this has an easy fix.

To master your own time as a remote worker, make sure to delegate a specific area for work. This could be a home office, a desk, a part of your living room or whatever else space you designate for working. This is the only place you work and you will associate this surrounding with work. In a sense, you get the feeling of commuting to your office and sitting behind a desk, only without spending an hour in traffic.

This is important because far too many remote workers and freelancers start their work day in bed and finish it on the couch in their living room. I'm not saying that you cannot do meaningful work while in bed (I've definitely done it myself before), it's just that these locations are not exactly conducive to productivity. Half an hour into tackling a task at work, you could feel like taking a nap or turning on your TV, and since you're right there in bed or on your couch, there's nothing stopping you from doing so. By designating specific areas for work, you're separating leisure time from that dedicated to work tasks.

Learning how to say no

I know quite a few people working remotely, and one of the biggest complaints I hear is that others don't take their work seriously. By this I mean that your parents, cousins, friends or someone else may drop in on you in the middle of the work day and expect company, since you're working from home and all, and not exactly working. They may even expect help with errands, doing their shopping or some other activity, since you're not in the office and you "have time for it".

In situations like these, it's crucial to say no, because a 5-minute task could end up as a 3-hour shopping journey. Even worse, you are teaching the people around you that this kind of behavior is okay, which means it will happen again.

Once you start working remotely, set your own schedule and ask people around you to respect it. Once you start your day at work, make yourself off limits for friends and family and any requests they may have, unless it's an emergency. Otherwise, you risk ruining your workday structure. Speaking of which...

Establish a structure

Having flexible hours is beautiful. As a remote worker, this is one of the biggest perks you could possibly get from your employer. Imagine being able to work when you're the most productive, instead of waking up at 7AM just to feel miserable and hating yourself until the fifth coffee kicks in. You get to work when you want, when you're the most productive and this is one of the reasons why so many people crave remote work.

However, there's also a hidden danger here. If you can work any time you want, you may end up working at odd times, even when you didn't think you'd work at all. Unless you establish a clear structure to your day, you could easily blow through your 8 (or whatever amount) hours and work much more than you initially imagined.

The pressure is even greater if you work in remote teams. Just as you're finishing off with work, a team member could be starting their shift in another time zone and you may feel pressured to respond to their messages or help them out with work. Set your own boundaries for availability and stick to them - and respect others' time as well.



Conclusion

Productivity in remote work environments is an interesting topic that will get more attention as an increasing number of companies and employers switch to this model of doing business. Even though remote work has a number of challenges, productivity is not the biggest one and there are tools and processes to improve it.

With proper communication, project management and time management, working remotely will make your team more productive than working in traditional offices, and they will have better work/life balance and more time to do the things they love.