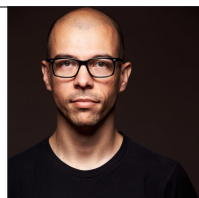


Distributed Teams Are Founded on Explicit Communication Channels

Juan Pablo Buriticá



All teams past a certain size become distributed. It could be across rooms, floors, buildings or cities. If you manage a team in a company that is growing fast, you will run into this challenge. By being deliberate and explicit about the communication channels used, your teams will be more productive, easier to manage, and able to grow faster. With the increasing popularity of remote work, understanding how to rely on different channels, especially written ones, will also enable you to be better prepared if your team eventually becomes distributed.

The primary benefit of choosing explicit communication types and channels for information is increased productivity. When team members aren't clear on where to find the information, their productivity is affected. They might waste a few hours trying to guess where to find it or, if they're good at asking questions, go around creating unnecessary focus interruptions for their team members. That poorly timed tap on the shoulder or chat app notification during deeply focused programming can be prevented if you are explicit on where and how information can be found.

A good way of reducing interruptions is to choose asynchronous communication channels for nonblocking items and helping team members review them on a cadence. For example, architectural decisions and discussions can begin as long-form documents with an established period of comments, also known as Request For Comments (RFCs). These can eventually be used as onboarding materials or blueprints for future systems. Asynchronous communication is best for situations in which real-time dialog is not necessary. Communicating status, reviewing code, broadcasting organizational changes, and the resolution of questions that are not urgent are well suited

for asynchronous channels like collaborative documents, forums, task-tracking tools, and email.

When the real-time exchange of ideas is crucial, it's more appropriate to choose synchronous communication channels like group chats, in-person meetings, or video calls. Grooming a backlog over email, or discussing strategy on a forum or a group chat when different members are busy will probably not lead to a timely outcome. For situations like this, you want to get your teams on a cadence so that they can block their time on the calendar and be present. This is especially important if you are spread across time-zones.

Multichannel chats have gained popularity because they can be used both synchronously and asynchronously. The good use of these tools can have a positive impact on the productivity of a team, but it can also have a detrimental effect if you set an expectation of always being present. Deep focus time is greatly affected when this happens. You can prevent your teams from falling into this behavior if you are explicit about the broadcasting of important information so that team members can disconnect. For example, set up a read-only announcement channel or agree on “quiet hours.” Having clear protocols for incident management and conflict resolution can also alleviate the need to be constantly present, in case something important happens.

When you build teams that rely on being in the same location to get access to information, you make it easier for information gaps to proliferate when team members are absent or the team outgrows the space. Information gaps create misalignment, and in turn, you need to spend more time managing communication. By defaulting to written communication channels from the beginning, you make it easier to distribute information that is clear and enables alignment.

One final benefit of investing in explicit communication channels from the beginning is setting up your team for fast growth. When communication practices become standards, events like adding new members to the team are less taxing on the group. For example, if you have a good set of RFCs that cover important past technical decisions and the discussions around them, new hires can understand the trade-offs you had to make. They might even have architectural diagrams or system contracts that are kept up to date with the evolution of your systems. A 90-day onboarding checklist template is another great example. You can use it as an evolving document to which new hires contribute as they navigate their first weeks in your team, making the next hire's experience much better.

Relying on in-person communication in the early days of your team is low friction and convenient, but it can bring your team to a halt if it grows beyond the limitations of physical space. If instead you build a culture of being explicit about the communication types and channels used and lean into written mediums you can build teams that are resilient to fast change. Thanks to the internet, written communications are accessible and aren't subject to the limitations of physical presence, serendipitous encounters by the seltzer machine, or inconvenient taps on the shoulder.