



Distributed scrum: how to manage a remote scrum team



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Summary: Distributed scrum teams are teams that are either partial or fully remote, who adapt scrum practices for remote work. While scrum provides a framework that can already be useful for remote workers, it's important to adjust some practices and use the right tools for a distributed team to be successful.

The business world changes rapidly -- sometimes overnight. We are rethinking and reshaping where we work and how we work, with a global workforce that is now more distributed and remote than ever before.

As businesses reorganize and adapt to new ways of working, especially remotely, agile practices are now more relevant than ever. The agile principles of adaptability, open collaboration, continuous learning, and self-organization can help distributed teams work together more effectively. In particular, the [scrum](#) methodology's defined set of rituals and roles can help serve as a framework to structure and manage remote teams of all kinds, but especially software teams.

“By 2022, 90 percent of agile development teams will include remote work as part of business continuity planning, up from nearly 30 percent in 2020”, according to Gartner*

What is a distributed scrum team?

A distributed scrum team is just that -- a scrum team that is either fully or partially remote. In order for a distributed scrum team to be successful, new approaches to adopting scrum need to be implemented. Because of constraints on ad hoc collaboration and informal communication, remote teams need to be more disciplined about their scrum rituals and create new opportunities for bonding and collaboration.

Fortunately, much of scrum's defined set of rituals, tools, and roles, can be adapted to a remote work environment, including [sprints](#), [ceremonies](#), daily scrums (aka [standups](#)), and [retrospectives](#).

It's recommended that a standard agile team follow the

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“two pizza” rule: teams should be able to be fed by two pizzas, which means teams should be about seven to 10 people. However, when working remotely, it’s often best to have smaller teams, especially since a video conference with 5 - 6 people is much easier to manage than 10. The traditional [scrum roles](#) are just as important with a distributed team but need to make adjustments for the specific challenges of remote work.

Benefits

- Wider pool of available talent that can increase skill sets of teams
- Teams across geographies that allows for 24-hour workday

Today, some of the best teams are self-organizing, cross-functional agile teams that come from a wide pool of global team members. Companies that allow remote workers can access a wider pool of talent.

As more companies have teams with at least some remote workers, scrum offers a framework to collaborate together effectively. Plus, the adaptability built into scrum that helps teams adjust to changing conditions and user requirements, helps remote teams be agile and constantly learn and improve.

“Remote teams that closely follow recommended agile technical practices could easily outperform a colocated team that does not”, according to Gartner*

Challenges

Agile development was originally intended for teams physically located in the same office. The [Agile Manifesto](#), written in 2001, stated that “the most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.” But much has changed since 2001. Software like Zoom, Slack, [Jira](#), [Confluence](#), and [Trello](#) have improved how remote teams collaborate. Zoom has done a great job of furthering remote conferencing for individuals and teams and helped expand agile to remote workers.

The world has different demands now, too. With talent dispersed around the world, it’s almost a fantasy to believe everyone can be co-located all the time. Also, there’s often a misperception that remote teams aren’t as productive. Yet numerous studies have found that remote teams are often more productive, with fewer distractions than at a physical workplace.

One of the biggest challenges for distributed scrum teams is communication. Without informal hallway chats and

impromptu in-person meetings, remote teams need to communicate more and, at times, over communicate. Video conferencing calls need to be adapted to particular time zones.

Remote workers may have feelings of isolation, less team unity, and miss social interaction with work colleagues. It also may be more challenging to develop a sense of camaraderie among work from home teams. At Atlassian, we make time for remote team meetings to not only be about work but also share personal stories and connect. We've even held games during virtual meetings to have some fun and get to know each other.

Finally, project knowledge can be scattered since it's more challenging for remote teams to share information, especially when team members are in different time zones. If a product backlog changes frequently or is not well-defined, coordinating a project may be challenging or time consuming.

How to build a successful remote scrum team

A remote scrum team should follow the core scrum tenants of clear communication, transparency, and a dedication for continuous improvement. A remote team's success depends on mutual trust, communication, and collaboration.

A distributed scrum team can benefit from a solid communication plan that includes:

- Remote work agreements
- A way to contact other team members for informal questions
- Establish agreements for how meetings should be structured
- How team members communicate their availability
- What collaboration tools should be used

Collaboration tools

Effective collaboration tools are essential for all forms of remote working. Agile teams use agile planning tools to collect stories/requirements, report and manage issues, and to track progress and quality.

Distributed teams should have a sort of virtual whiteboard tool that provides visibility of project steps and flow. At Atlassian, we use our own tools for that including Jira and Confluence. Whatever you use, this tool should:

- Be accessible to all team members
- Enable collaboration, sharing, and notifications to team

members

- A collection of relevant, engaging information

We also use Zoom video conferencing and Slack for impromptu communication. Jira is used for issue tracking, Confluence for team collaboration, and Trello is used to make lists and track progress.

Impromptu chats

Since quick water cooler chats disappear with remote work, it's important to allow for these informal communication channels to exist. If you use Slack, you can create specific channels with different intents. The scrum master should keep open communication channels to each part of the scrum team, as well as facilitate communication with the team as a whole.

It's also important for remote teams to [build a united development culture](#) by:

- Over-communicating decisions across all geographies
- Minimizing the friction in setting up the development environment
- Clearly defining the definition of done
- Creating guidelines for filing effective bug reports

Daily scrum meetings

Daily scrums are an essential part of scrum and even more important for a distributed scrum team. These short, daily team meetings provide a quick forum for a distributed team that helps with focus, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving.

If a team is distributed in different time zones or geographies, it's important to schedule regular video conferencing. You can also hold asynchronous stand-ups where team members use Slack to check-in or comment on their work board to share updates. This provides a quick forum for a distributed team that helps with focus, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving.

At Atlassian we use three simple questions to generate a structure for our stand-ups:

- What did I work on yesterday?
- What am I working on today?
- What issues are blocking me?

Product backlog

It's important that the features of the sprint backlog are clearly documented and "definition of ready" agreed upon. If product backlog items are ambiguous and unclear, the team may lose momentum and the time to resolution can be delayed.

Self organization

While agile promotes self-reliance and organization, it's particularly important for remote team members to take ownership of work and expand that to the entire team. Team members can take responsibility for achieving business goals and how they are contributing to it. You can provide visibility by documenting expectations on a Confluence page and agree how to hold each member accountable.

All teams are distributed

In a global organization with multiple offices in different locations, most teams are distributed. Even if only one team member is remote, the team should adopt remote principles to share work between locations, communicate effectively, and maintain a successful culture throughout the organization.

As distributed teams and workplaces grow, it's important to have clear and concise remote work methods, processes, tools, and ways of working at scale. This can come from adopting agile methods such as scrum, [SAFe](#), [LeSS](#), or whatever works for your business.

Atlassian provides tools that help remote teams plan, connect, collaborate, and work together better. Atlassian's enterprise agile planning platform, Jira Align, helps improve visibility, strategic alignment, and adaptability. For remote teams Jira can help with project planning, management, and ticket tracking by providing visibility to all team members. Trello helps teams build sprints, offer visibility of project status, assign team members, and move projects forward. Scrum teams can also leverage Confluence for building requirements.

*Gartner "3 Steps to Sustain Productivity and Collaboration in Remote Agile and DevOps Teams," Manjunath Bhat, Mike West, 6 May 2020.

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