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Exploring Informal Conversation in the Remote Workplace

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“We need each other more than ever as we live under the constraints of lock-down due to the pandemic. We need to be deliberate about our social connections because they are no longer built into our daily lives.”

[Canadian Mental Health Association]



Preface

This report is the result of an 8-week deep dive into the informal conversation habits of knowledge workers in North America before and after COVID-19. The research includes a literature review, an anonymous survey, and nine remote interviews supervised by Dr. Carman Neustaedter for a directed study at Simon Fraser University's School of Interactive Arts and Technology.

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How might we reduce social isolation during COVID-19 by creating an informal way for remote workers to connect throughout the workday?

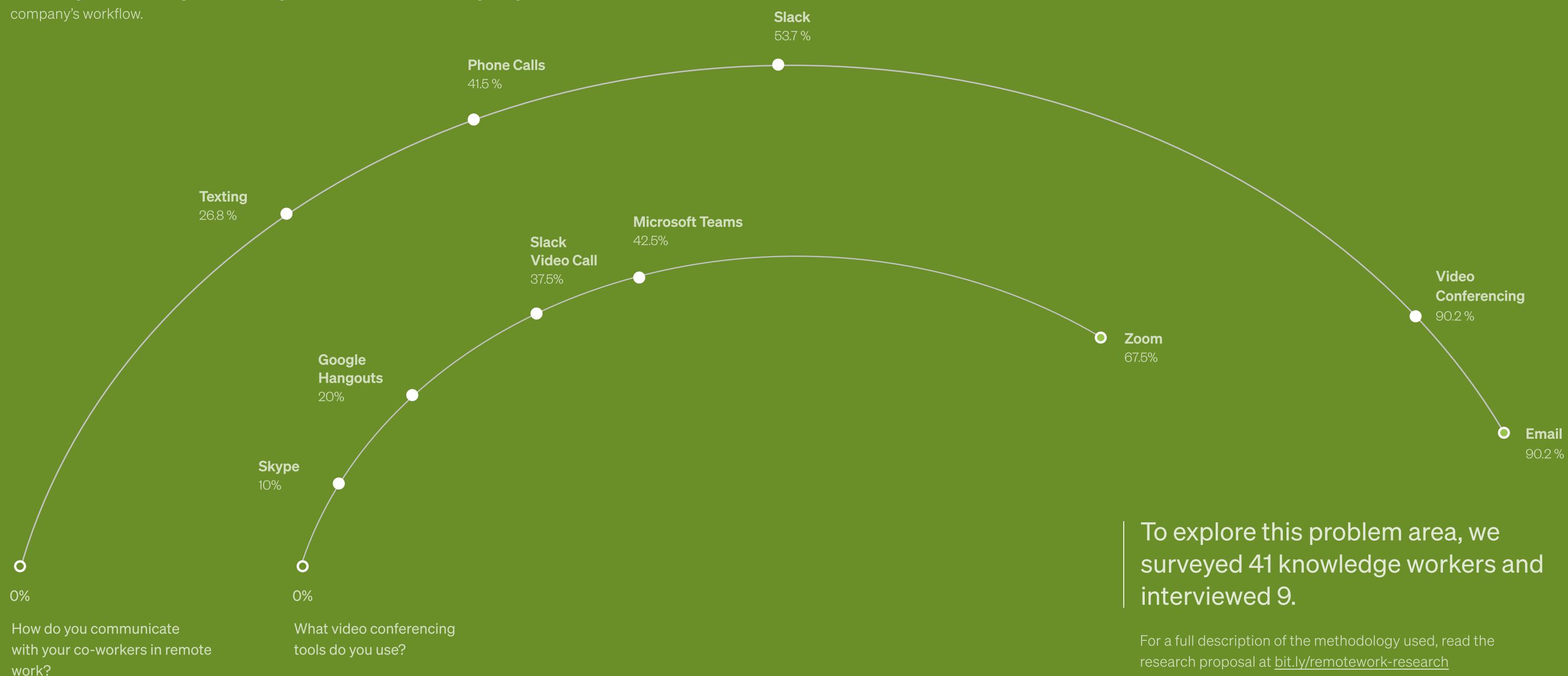
Informal conversation is an essential ingredient in creating a productive and supportive team culture. However, in the absence of face-to-face interactions, over 4.7 million Canadian workers now rely on video calls and instant messages to maintain their connection to the workplace. This shift has left people feeling disconnected from their workplace and from each other.

Examining Current Telecommunication Platforms

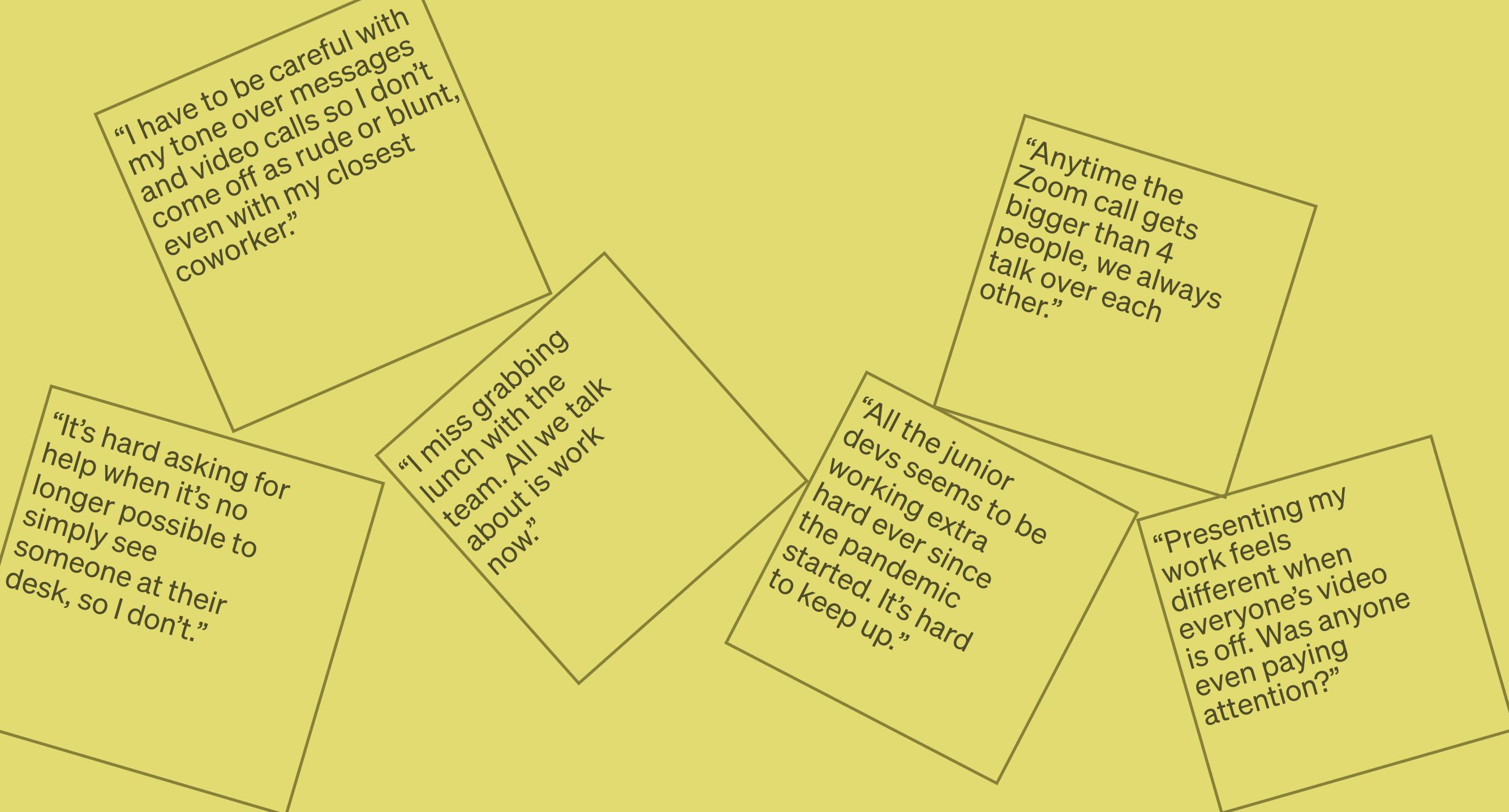
In the context of COVID-19, many organizations have had to find new ways for their employees to communicate with one another. For most, focusing on the platforms that they had already been using prior to the pandemic has been the quickest solution, one that also spares the time that goes into finding and introducing new technologies to a company's workflow.

These platforms, however, are not without their flaws — according to a study published by the Angus Reid Institute in October, “the percentage of [Canadians] saying that [video calling] makes them feel truly connected has plummeted as usage has increased.” In addition, 95.1% of the survey respondents stated that it was difficult getting to know and socialize with

their coworkers in a remote setting. Awkwardness, inconvenience, and confusion about availability were all listed as possible reasons.



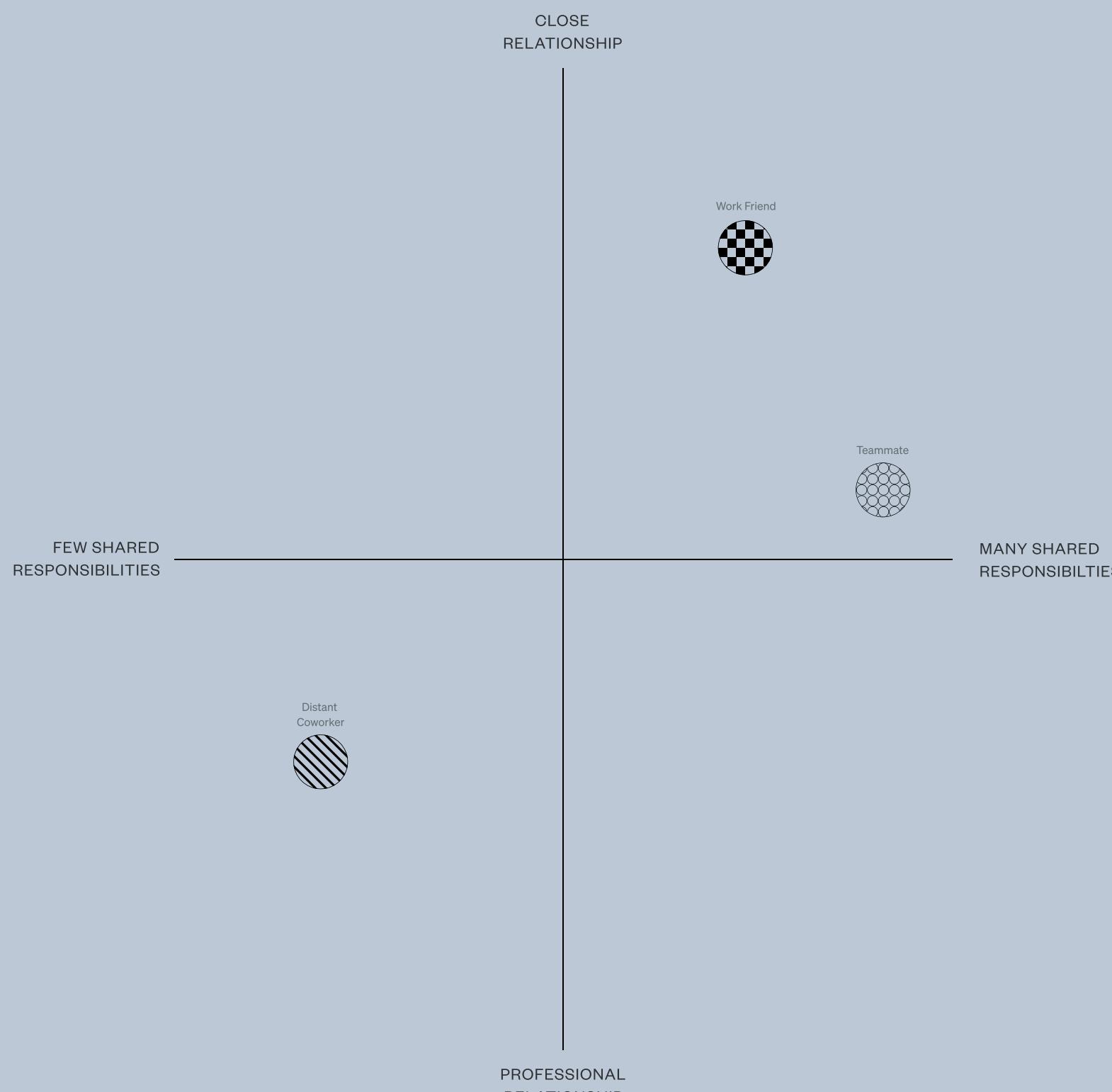
Why is it a challenge to form authentic social connections online?



The Power of Informal Conversation

Studies have shown the power of informal conversation for building social support, creating opportunities for collaboration and for improving job satisfaction overall (Gilson et al., 2015; Kraut et al., 1990; Whittaker, et al., 1994). While seemingly insignificant, it's these small moments of connection, from stopping by a coworker's desk to catching up with a teammate over lunch, that create a sense of community at work. These conversations foster familiarity and mutual respect within teams and across departments,

creating opportunities for colleagues to seek information, opinions, and guidance, in a way that is both spontaneous and personable throughout the workday (Charalampous et al. 2019; Kraut et al., 1990). With these conversations comes better feedback, a more productive working environment and more successful collaboration over time (Kraut et al., 1990).



Types of Workplace Connections

Working in knowledge industries, building relationships with others in the organization is often part of the job. Sometimes these relationships are born out of necessity. Other times, they happen unexpectedly and can evolve into real friendships outside of work. Below are three types of connections that one might encounter at work:

The Teammate

Naturally, colleagues who work on the same team are aligned by a common set of goals, and they will have more interactions throughout the workweek to achieve them. Building a closer and trusting relationship with teammates allows everyone to be more productive and it makes the workday more enjoyable. How? It makes it a lot easier to ask for help, receive honest feedback and to set and communicate boundaries.

The Work Friend

Work friends share common interests beyond completing their weekly deliverables, they share passions and values that bring their connection outside of their 9 to 5. Their strong connection creates the space for better collaboration and a more positive work culture. Spending time with work friends can look like: grabbing beer together after work, sharing a mid-day coffee break or joking together over IM.

The Distant Coworker

The Distant Coworker is somebody who you would meet at a company social or in the lunchroom, but who you wouldn't typically work with. These types of connections are often unexpected. Yet, it can be valuable to befriend a colleague who understands your workplace culture and can relate to the challenges that come with it, without being too involved in your day-to-day work. These types of connections are more common in larger companies with more departments and employees.



Edith is a junior web developer. She recently landed her first programming job at a mid-sized tech firm and is motivated to succeed in her role, despite the challenges of being the sole woman on a team that she has yet to meet in-person.

JOB TITLE	INCOME	CITY
JUNIOR WEB DEVELOPER	\$60,000 USD	SEATTLE, WA

ONLINE TOOLS



As a web-developer, Edith needs Gitkraken to track and save multiple versions of her work. Because Gitkraken is used often, Edith always has the Gitkraken client open on her desktop.



When Edith works, she's an organized mess. Edith is the type of person to keep multiple tabs open and never close them.



For informal communication with her teammates, Edith resorts to communicating on Slack. Slack allows Edith to contact team-members quickly without having to dive into a video-call.

COMMUNICATION HABITS

Formal Context

Edith's tone depends on her relationship level regardless of authority in the workplace.

[1-on-1]

Hason Wang 5:00 PM
Edith, please let know when you'll be finished with the task I assigned yesterday.

Edith 5:10 PM
I'll be sure to let you know. I should be finished in about an hour.

Edith 5:10 PM
I've finished debugging! It seems like it was just a testing error.

Hason Wang 5:20 PM
Looks good. Thanks again.

[Team Chat]

Edith 11:32 AM
Thank you for all the warm greetings! I'm excited to be part of the team!

Edith 10:52 AM
awesome, that sounds great! 😊😊

Informal Context

With colleagues that she's comfortable with, Edith has no reservations about her lower case texts, slang, and emojis.

[1-on-1]

Edith 12:29 PM
hm i guess he can be a little crazy sometimes hopefully things improve!

Jennifer 12:37 PM
oh god yeah for sure

Edith 12:29 PM
jeez, are we supposed to have this done by friday? i'm feeling sooo behind...

Jennifer 12:37 PM
sorry to hear that lol

[Team Chat]

Edith's Workspace & Living Situation

Edith currently lives and works in an apartment with two roommates, who are also working remotely. Because the three all share the dining room table, Edith is often distracted and must mute herself during team meetings.



GOALS

001
Workplace Visibility

DESCRIPTION

In meetings, Edith strives to deliver her ideas in a clear and impactful manner, despite being underrepresented as a new hire and a Black woman in tech. She wants to be sure her ideas are received and not have others speak over her.

002
Comfort and Confidence with Coworkers

Edith wants to be confident that she can get reliable feedback and assistance. Instead of having to worry about office politics and competition, she desires camaraderie and mutual assistance from her project team.

003
Clear Work-Life Balance

With the idea of an office and home life blurred by remote work, Edith wants to be able to effectively work without feeling pressured to work overtime or take shorter breaks. She prefers to maintain a consistent schedule to make time for her hobbies, friends, and family.

FRUSTRATIONS

001
Misinterpretations

Edith worries about having her messages misinterpreted by coworkers. This also applies to Edith potentially misinterpreting messages or mannerisms in video calls.

002
Unrealistic Expectations

It's difficult to present complex issues to those with little experience in development, such as Frank. This can lead to unrealistic deadlines.

003
Competitive Jr. Culture

Dislikes the competitive culture fueled by coworkers working longer hours. It's much more difficult to have her ideas acknowledged.



Frank Aitken made the internal move to a new team only four months before COVID-19. As a project manager, he understands the importance of establishing positive relationships with his team, but is concerned about how working online will influence his team's collaboration and overall dynamic.

JOB TITLE	INCOME	CITY
PROGRAM MANAGER	\$140,000 USD	SEATTLE, WA

ONLINE TOOLS

zoom

Zoom is Frank's preferred method for video conferencing throughout the workday. Frank uses Zoom to host team meetings and 1-on-1's.

chrome

Throughout the workday, Frank always has a Chrome window open for research, emails, Google Calendar, and other apps that he prefers to look at in-browser. He's the type of person who keeps his tabs to a minimum.

slack

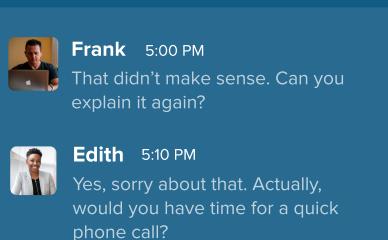
For informal conversations with his teammates, Frank enjoys using Slack. Slack allows Frank to contact his team-members quickly with less effort than a video-call.

COMMUNICATION HABITS

Formal Context

Frank isn't entirely aware of how his messages come off to others. To his coworkers, his proper grammar and punctuation sound cold. They think Frank is someone that is always strictly focused on getting the job done.

[1-on-1]



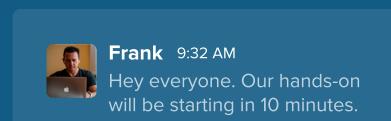
Informal Context

Frank's texts are plain and proper, no matter who he is talking to. He will use the occasional gif, if the situation calls for celebration or wit. Frank does not enjoy texting.

[1-on-1]



[Team Chat]



[Team Chat]



Frank's Workspace & Living Situation

Frank lives at home with his wife and two young girls aged 6 and 7. His office on the first floor of their suburban home is his quiet space to work.



GOALS

- 001 Establishing Deeper Connections

DESCRIPTION

In his previous position, Frank prioritized having one-on-one coffee chats with each team member to understand their concerns, and to get to know them in a casual setting. Now managing an entirely new team, Frank hopes to continue having these one-on-one's, even in a remote environment.

002

Time with Family

Frank wants to be there to see his children grow up. He values evenings and weekends with the family, and ends each workday promptly at 5:30pm. In order to make this schedule work, Frank is very busy. This can be a challenge for his coworkers, who often rely on Frank's assistance to complete their tasks.

FRUSTRATIONS

- 001 "Do I really understand my team and their needs?"

DESCRIPTION

Frank, who comes from a non-technical background, worries that his minimal knowledge of code will make it difficult for him to understand the responsibilities and concerns of his team.

002

"Virtual team building isn't the same"

Having planned several team building events that resulted in short and unengaged interactions, Frank feels a shift in team culture but is unsure how to address it.

003

"Disjointed conversations"

After a couple turbulent meetings of team members talking over one another in Zoom, Frank implemented a 'raise hand' rule. While this has made for more orderly conversation, he's noticing that lately collaboration feels stunted and certain team members haven't been contributing as often.



Hason is a Senior Web Developer at a mid-sized tech firm. Hason has been with the company for 4 years, and was recently promoted. As somebody with seniority within the company, Hason tends to onboard new web developers.

JOB TITLE	INCOME	CITY
SENIOR WEB DEVELOPER	\$90,000 USD	SEATTLE, WA

ONLINE TOOLS

GitHub + GitKraken

Hason is in charge of his team's version control. Having Gitkraken open on his desktop allows him to monitor changes from his development team.

chrome

Hason's Google Chrome is neat and organized. Each tab he opens serves a purpose in his workflow.

slack

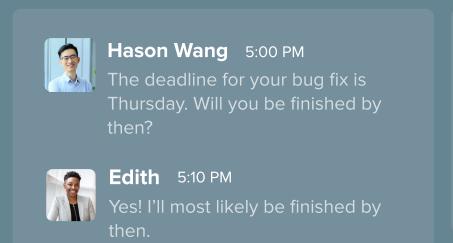
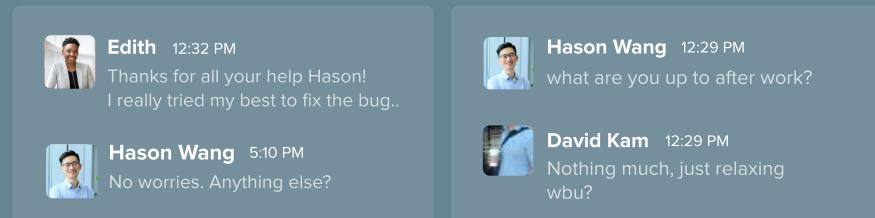
Hason uses Slack as his primary method of contacting co-workers. His conversation topics are strictly work-focused and his co-workers can depend on Hason to respond quickly.

COMMUNICATION HABITS

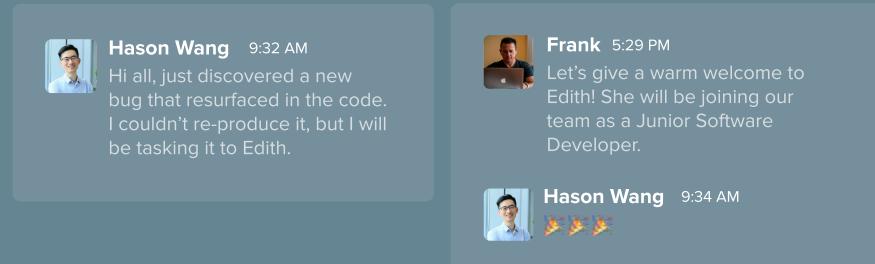
Formal Context

To colleagues that he is less comfortable with, Hason's speech is robotic & focused. He uses proper grammar in an effort to appear more professional.

[1-on-1]



[Team Chat]



Hason's Workspace & Living Situation

Hason lives alone in a studio apartment 20 minutes away from the office. Living downtown, he often has to mute himself so he doesn't disrupt meetings with city noise.



His workspace is tidy and distraction free. After work, his desk turns into his gaming station.



GOALS

- 001 Climbing the company ladder

DESCRIPTION

Hason has been working at the company for 4 years. With his experience in the field, he believes he would be well suited in a managerial position. However, he believes he lacks the leadership skills to take on this position.

002

- Clear work-life balance

Hason likes to have structure in his work-routine. He logs into his computer at 8:30am and logs off at 4:30pm, exactly 8 hours. In his time off from work, Hason is an avid gamer.

FRUSTRATIONS

- 001 "It's weird reaching out to people you've never met in real life."

DESCRIPTION

Hason relies on face-to-face interaction to understand how his co-workers feel. To Hason, introducing himself through video-calls or even instant messaging feels inauthentic, causing an awkward disconnect.

002

- "It's less convenient to start conversations."

Compared to when he used to see his coworkers in-person, Hason believes it's harder to start conversations and to keep them going online. He misses going for lunch with his work friends and being able to see his colleagues at their desks.

Reflection

As designers and especially as students, ongoing reflection is an important part of our process. Our self-authored course outline even requires a group discussion for it each week. We reflect to realign the team, to dissect our challenges, to celebrate our wins, and remind ourselves to apply each lesson going forward. Below are two notable items that will shape our project in the weeks to come.

The Limitations of Snowball Sampling

Given the short time frame of two weeks for this stage of research, our team chose to use the snowball sampling method to recruit survey and interview participants. And although our intention was to nominate people in our lives that would help diversify the conversation on remote work, we recognize that this is still only a small subgroup of the entire population.

The Complexity of Designing during a Pandemic

With the COVID-19 pandemic, we are seeing communication technologies being used in a context and scale that the world hasn't seen before. Suddenly, employees everywhere — regardless of their age, occupation, or living situation — have been thrust into a chaotic experiment in working from home. As student designers researching this topic, this has been quite difficult. One piece of advice that our supervisor Dr. Neustaedter gave us, was to look at people's work lives and their home lives as one experience, now that the boundaries between the two are gone. Asking about noisy roommates and cramped apartment spaces are fair game during interviews on work, because these factors are now all connected to how one acts on the job.

As an additional step to thinking holistically, we wrote a set of innovation considerations on the next page.

Innovation Considerations

Access to Technology

Does the user have stable internet connection? Do they have a computer at home that is compatible with their company's software? A working mic and webcam? Does their company have the budget for the latest technology?

Access to Productive Work Environments

Does the user have a quiet space to work at home? Are they living with children, siblings, roommates, or a partner who is also working remotely?

Establishing Work-Life Boundaries

Is the user on a flexible or rigid work schedule? How are they handling the blurring of boundaries between work and home life? Are they able to log off at 5pm? If not, what is stopping them?

Fatigue and Pains

How many hours a day does the user stare at the screen? Do they have an ergonomic set up? Is their company able to provide them with a work stipend?

Social Circles Outside of Work

Who does the user rely on for social connection? Do they have a reliable circle of friends outside of work? Family? Do they have a community to rely on?

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“My hope is that we will be able to come out of this pandemic with a greater appreciation for how vital human connections are, in our day-to-day lives and in our long-term well-being. And we can do that.”

DR. VIVEK MURTHY

19th Surgeon General of the United States

