

The Story Behind Klaviyo's Successful Transition to Remote Work

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Since its inception, Klaviyo had been fostering an in-office work environment. Everything was optimized around creating easy ways for people to communicate, share ideas, and collaborate. As a company, we succeeded in creating and nurturing such a culture. Walking around our Boston office back in February of this year, one would likely see a training session or a tech talk, a few groups of people whiteboarding, and individual Klaviyos working together. At the same time, many more would be doing heads-down work in the silent booths and at their desks with green canopy leaves to block the lights and headphones to eliminate the noises. Undoubtedly, this environment, which allowed accommodating the needs of many individuals to do different types of work, was one of the key components that made Klaviyo so successful. Like with the snap of a finger, it all changed the day Klaviyo decided to go remote because of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Klaviyo Boston office before the pandemic



(This is not a staged photo!)

On the surface, it may seem as it should have been an easy transition. After all, a SaaS business is online first, right? This is true, but only partially. While the mere act of people moving remote was fairly smooth, working from home was challenging for many, and collaboration at a distance wasn't as effective. Klaviyo took a lot of measures to help all of us with the transition, however, the Engineering Department had its own set of distinct challenges. We needed to figure out how to maintain an inclusive remote culture and collaborative environment where engineers can design, build, and ship software with confidence.

In a situation like this, it's essential to accept the fact that things are changing and sometimes very rapidly. It's important to take a step back from the turmoil, observe the situation from a broader perspective, and recognize emerging patterns. Understanding what has to be improved is half the battle.

There are plenty of remarkable articles online with a lot of good advice on how to transition from an in-office environment to remote work. There is not much value in writing yet another generic post, so I'm going to describe what unique practices have worked for us, and how these learnings helped us to become a better remote engineering organization. Some tools and processes are unique to software engineering teams and some can be easily applied in other domains.

Reducing Distractions

Almost everyone started facing more distractions on their very first day of working from home. The lack of proper setup, partners, and roommates now working from home too, kids and pets constantly demanding attention, as well as many other things prevented most of us from being able to focus long enough to get something done. In addition, very few of us had defined boundaries between work and life.

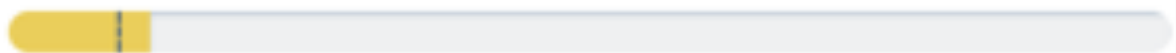
In two weeks ▼

Time allocation

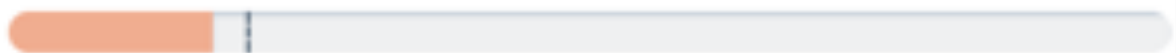
42 hr Focus Time i Good



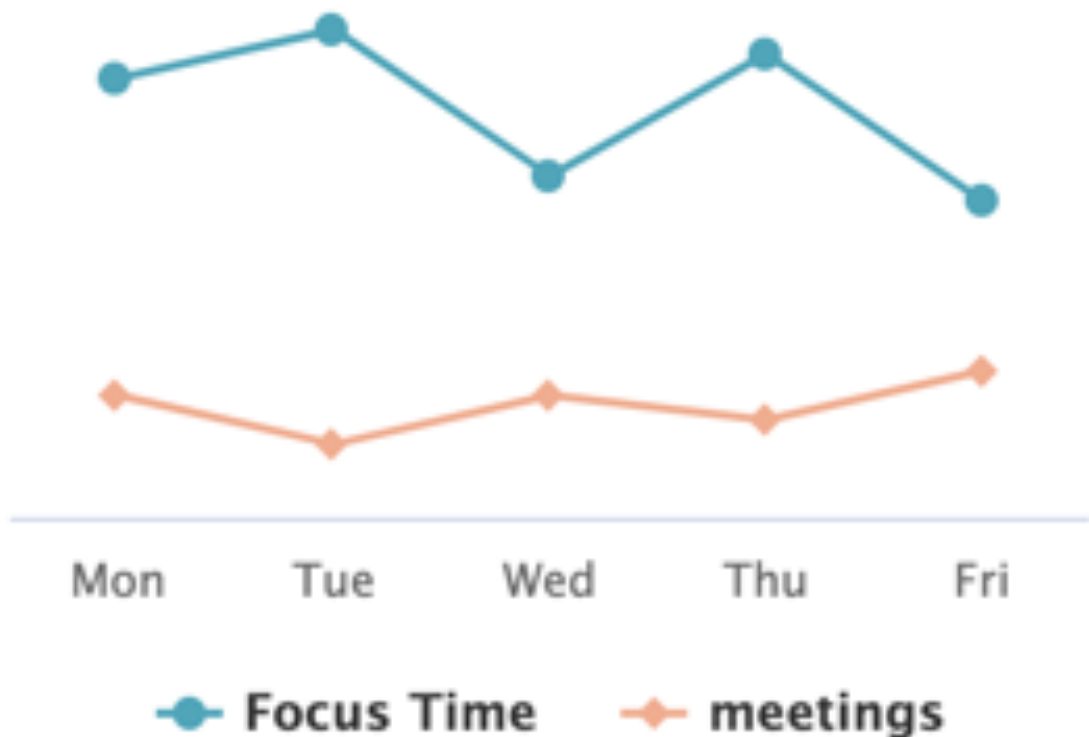
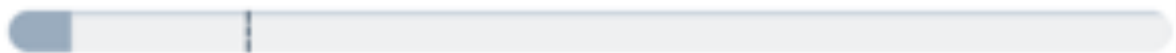
8 hr fragmented time i High



12 hr meetings i Ok



3.5 hr other events i Great



Two-week sprint: time spent analysis

On the Integrations team, we chatted about this problem and discovered that every person had a new work schedule. So we moved around all our recurring meetings in order to accommodate everyone and to allow each of us to have long uninterrupted focus-time blocks. As a team, we started using ClockWise, a smart calendar assistant, that helped us optimize our schedules further, and set our work hour preferences. It also took care of automatically reserving focus-time on our calendars.

We also agreed to respect each other's work-life boundaries and to avoid scheduling meetings and sending messages during off-hours. Because individual needs have continued to change, we scheduled periodic check-ins as a way to ensure we all remain productive and satisfied with our work schedules.

Improving Communication

In the early days of being fully remote, another problem also started to emerge – communication issues. We were accustomed to frequent in-person interactions. Teams knew when and how to communicate internally and externally. It was natural and easy. Remote collaboration tools relied on different communication patterns, which posed new challenges. There were unusual delays in responses via Slack and email, communication styles were different, it was hard to read somebody's frame of mind at a distance. People worried that they distracted each other too much and at the same time were frustrated with longer feedback loops.

In order to address all these friction points, teams had to come up with better communication patterns that were effective and non-distracting. One of the best tools to do this is a practice called a Working With Me Document. In a nutshell, it's a set of questions that helps people share how they prefer to collaborate, communicate, learn new things, give and receive feedback, and what are their quirks. Below are a few questions with response samples from the members of the Engineering and Product departments:

What does your daily schedule look like (while working from home)?

» I usually start working between 8:30am and 9:00am. Oftentimes, I check work email and Slack while I'm brewing my morning coffee, which is around 7:00am.

» Around noon to 1:30pm, I come out of hiding, hang out with the family, exercise and eat lunch.

What's the best way to communicate with you?

» Style: Assertive/Direct. I'll ask questions if something isn't clear to me.

» Medium: Slack for real time communication, email for asynchronous communication (via GitHub, ProjectManagement Tool, Wiki, Google Docs), Zoom for quick discussion (more than a few Slack messages), planned meeting (via Zoom) for long discussions.

How do you like to give and receive feedback?

» I like clear, direct feedback. I don't want to misconstrue what is being said.

» I don't like feedback sandwiches (praise-critique-praise).

What are your quirks?

» I hate missing deadlines.

» At times I feel like I can have sensory overload. Sometimes it happens when in a big meeting if everyone is talking at the same time.

Such information about the people we are working with is immensely valuable in general! It was irreplaceable in helping us navigate through the transition to working from home. Matter of fact, we now know more about each other and feel more connected than ever before.

I highly suggest going through this exercise with your teammates. In the appendix, I attached the template that we used, as well as a short guide for the teams about this practice.

Restructuring Work

Changes in communication and collaboration patterns led to the need to adjust our operating procedures. Historically, Klaviyo has built a very strong culture of collaboration and support. In the office, people assisted each other and swarmed on tasks naturally. Going remote made it harder to catch subtle signals in our coworkers' behaviors that cued us to offer help. In addition, some of us didn't feel as comfortable asking questions remotely as we did in person.

One of the first things we did on the Integrations team to address this was the solidification of role responsibilities as well as the introduction of two new sub-roles for individual contributors. Documenting all possible responsibilities on the team and assigning them to predefined roles helped eliminate ambiguity in communication and in our daily operations.

In addition, we started assigning a lead engineer and at least one supporting engineer to every sizable project. The responsibilities of each role are scoped within a project and provide clear guidance on all the things around its execution. It's important to note that these roles are not equivalents of job titles. At Klaviyo, engineers of all levels have opportunities to lead projects of various sizes and complexities.

For example, a lead engineer is the point person on a project and is responsible for facilitating its planning, helping with feature specs, driving system design sessions, ensuring steady execution progress, and communicating with stakeholders within the team and across the organization. In turn, a supporting engineer is an accompanying expert on a project who provides supplemental opinions, reviews technical specs and pull requests, and helps with implementation. Such groups of tightly coupled engineers have outstanding velocity, function independently, and minimize distractions of other team members.

Among other innovations, many teams started automating their daily engineering duties. With more and more engineers joining Klaviyo almost every week, we needed a structured and fair way to perform daily engineering rotations. A combination of PagerDuty scheduling, a Slack integration, and Zapier triggers allow creating profoundly marvelous automations! For example, the Integrations team gets the following Slack notification every weekday morning:



Daily Rotation APP 8:01 AM

Bug Triage (15 mins/day) and #integration_alerts triage (realtime): @charlie.stark

Sentry Fixes (pick one, up to 30 mins/day) and #sentry watch (realtime): @colleen.schwarz

#help_integrations (realtime) and PR reviews (same day): @alex.mason

It comes before all of us start our days, which allows for better planning and time management. These rotations are dynamic and bots tag engineers on rotation when a new bug is filed, an issue in production is reported, or somebody asks for a code review:



In addition to automations, we also had great success with the concept of “deploy buddies”. Klaviyo Engineers push code many times a day and usually release multiple features and enhancements every week. As a way to increase our confidence in releasing code while transitioning to working from home, engineers started pairing up for deployments. It’s always good to have more than one person monitoring a release – watching application telemetrics, keeping tabs on the issue log alerts, etc. This new routine proved to be especially effective and helpful for new hires (yes, we onboarded more than a dozen engineers since the start of the pandemic!)

Maintaining and Nurturing Culture

One of the best things about being in the office was the lack of friction in collaboration and the ease of communication. For Klaviyo, it was natural to roll in their chairs from one part of the office to the other and then work on something together. Several teams even had guest bean bags and tiny couches. Most of all, it was fun! There were collective coffee brewings, VHS movie Tuesdays, board game nights, Friday evening hangouts, and much more.



VHS movie Tuesdays at Klaviyo

As you might expect, [we replicated many of these things](#) via online tools. We also introduced new fun activities like engineering book clubs, group workouts, and yoga sessions, and a few others.

While this made the quality of the work-life much better for existing Klaviyos, many teams still faced the challenge of making new hires feel welcome and part of the team. In the office, there are a lot of opportunities for social interactions. We sit together with our teams, so collaboration is easy, and when someone wants to grab a coffee, they often ask if others want to come along as well. Often, weâ€™ll also eat lunch together in the office. These little interactions really went far to let us get to know more about each other â€” not just about how we work as engineers, but whatâ€™s going on in our lives outside of work as well.

Unfortunately, with the pandemic neither of these things really became possible. We noticed that many team members donâ€™t really enjoy eating over Zoom â€” it feels awkward compared to eating lunch together in person. And when someone went to grab a coffee, usually it would happen in isolation. Weâ€™re all at home, so itâ€™s not like one person can brew enough coffee for two people and share it!

In order to try to address this problem, we started scheduling coffee socials, twice a week. Itâ€™s purely optional, but most of the team shows up during the coffee social hours anyways! Sometimes we just talk about whatâ€™s on our minds, life outside of work in general, etc. and other times weâ€™ll participate in activities like <https://skribbl.io>. Weâ€™ve learned that everyone on the Flows team has a Nintendo Switch, so we hope to play something together during our coffee hour soon! Overall, itâ€™s been a great way to try to get to know each other and spend some time with each other without any work-related pressures!