Remote Initiatives - living a remote-first culture without losing touch

tb.lx

Lisbon 2020

Why these initiatives can be helpful for you

tb.lx went fully remote from one day to the other, and worked in this model ever since March 13th (our last day in the office). We tried many initiatives to keep up our culture, keep employees engaged and maintain a healthy work environment.

We consolidated our learnings for you with some **"how-to's" and implementation ideas**, which can be found in this document.

If you are further interested in how we built our remote-first culture besides these initiatives, you can find
- our Guidelines for Remote Work *here*,
- our Guidelines for Remote-First *here*,
- and our secret recipe *here*.

Overview of our remote initiatives (1/2)

What?	When?	How?	Time needed	Tool	Engagement Rating (1-10)
tb.lx Quiz	Every 2 weeks, Wednesday 6pm after work	People Team preparing a theme, collecting facts, inserting it into the quiz tool	Prep: 2 hours Quiz: 15-30 minutes	Kahoot.it and Teams (with Screensharing)	10
tb.lx Newsletter	Every Friday afternoon	COM Team collects what's going on every week and sends a weekly update (a mix of casual and product content)	Prep: 2 hours Reading: 5 minutes	Outlook	10
tb.lx Heartbeats	Monthly, last day of the month	After each month, the Teams come together (during their Retro, if applicable) and reflect on the last month: Mad/Sad, Glad, Kudos	Prep: 10 minutes individually, 30 min for People Team	PowerPoint, MatterMost/ Slack	10
Virtual Lunch	Spontaneous	tb.lxer sends an outlook invite or checks on Mattermost/Slack who's in for a virtual lunch	Lunch Time	MS Teams	4
Coffee and Water-cooler Moments	Spontaneous	tb.lxer checks on Mattermost/Slack who's in for a virtual coffee	10 minutes	MS Teams	6
tb.lx Happy Hour	Spontaneous	tb.lxer sends an outlook invite for a remote happy hour after work	As much as people wish	MS Teams (and https://skribbl.io)	8
Monthly Themes	Every Month	The People & COM team decides on a theme for the month and invites for voluntary after-work sessions	Prep: 2 hours Sessions: 1 hour each	MS Teams, MatterMost/ Slack	8

Overview of our remote initiatives (2/2)

tb.lx

What?	When?	How?	Time needed	Tool	Engagement Rating
Individual Coaching Sessions	Whenever needed	Our Talent & HR Manager offered individual coaching sessions for people who struggled during remote working	30 min – 1 hour	MS Teams	9
tb.lx Bingo	Ongoing	The COM Team prepared a Bingo Sheet with Screenshots + Names of all employees, to tick them off after having a personal chat/coffee/beer	Whenever possible how long as needed/wanted	MS Teams	7
Panel Discussions	Every 2 weeks, one evening 6pm after work	People & COM Team chose a topic and speakers to introduce the topic (related to monthly theme), everyone could share their opinion and start a discussion	Prep: 15-30 min Panel: 1 hour +	MS Teams	9
Book Club	One after-work session, to be repeated	People & COM Team chose a topic, volunteers offered to present a book based on the topic, 5min presentation, 10 min discussions with the group	Prep: 0-20 min Book Club: 1 hour	MS Teams	8
Documentary Club	One after-work session, to be repeated	People & COM Team chose a topic (based on monthly theme) and send around a link to a 5 min documentary. At the session, it was discussed	Prep: 20 min Documentary Club: 1 hour	MS Teams, YouTube	9
Mindful Quarantine Spotify Playlist	Ongoing	People & COM Team created an open tb.lx Mindful Quarantine playlist on Spotify, all tb.lxers out their favorite quarantine hits	Prep: 10 min	Spotify	9

Non-remote regular initiatives

What?	When?	How?	Time needed	Tool	Engagement Rating
Contrarian Office Hours	Every second Friday afternoon	CEO invites for a regular meeting and hosts it. Fixed agenda, time boxing, and follow ups. See "implementation of initiatives" on the last slide	Meeting: 90 min	(MS Teams)	10
All-hands	Once per month	Once a month the whole company comes together and discusses important company updates, led by the CEO	Prep CEO: 30 min Talk: 1 hour	(MS Teams)	10
Welcome Breakfast	First day of a new hire	Non-remote: People Team invites for a 30 minutes slot on the first day of the new joiner and prepares a breakfast. Everyone in the team introduces themselves and we have breakfast together Remote: Same procedure, but everyone is having their own breakfast/coffee at home	Prep: ordering food Breakfast: 30 min	(MS Teams)	10
Talk & Beer	Once per month target, sometimes less	Employees volunteer to talk about a topic which doesn't have to be related to our daily work, followed by a discussion. We had talks about Electric Grid, 3D printing, or Greek mythologies and the origin of words	Prep: Individual Talk: 1 hour	(MS Teams)	9

Implementation of remote initiatives

1. Form a dedicated team/task force/swarm (whatever you want to call it)

Selection Criteria:
- Organization Skills
- Empathy Skills (has a feeling for the team dynamics)
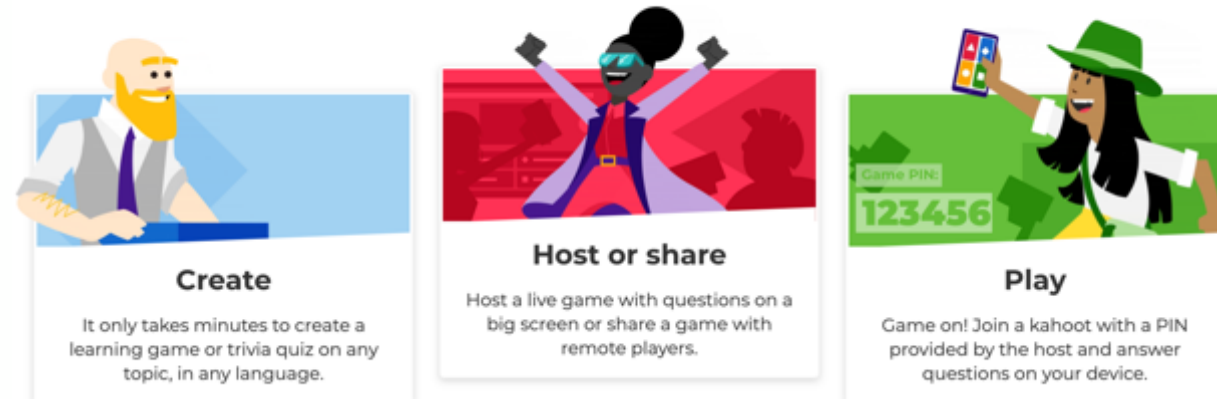- Well accepted within the team

2. Select a few initiatives and set goals for these initiatives

3. Accept that not all initiatives will be well received and that not everyone will participate

4. Give you employees time and authority to (not) participate on initiatives, come up with new ones and give honest feedback about them

Implementation of remote initiatives – Quiz

1. Choose a theme, e.g. fun facts about everyone, traditions of the cultures of your employees, baby pictures of your employees, company facts
2. Collect facts/pictures from your employees (who want to participate)
3. Create a game at https://kahoot.com/
4. Invite your colleagues to a Video Call
5. Ask your colleagues to use their phone to open https://kahoot.it/
6. Share your Screen during the whole game
7. Ask your colleagues to enter the game PIN and choose a name
8. Start the game (the questions will be shown on your shared screen, the participants will select the answers on their phone

How does Kahoot! work?

Create
It only takes minutes to create a learning game or trivia quiz on any topic, in any language.

Host or share
Host a live game with questions on a big screen or share a game with remote players.

Play
Game on! Join a kahoot with a PIN provided by the host and answer questions on your device.

Implementation of remote initiatives – Newsletter

1. If you have a person in your team who likes to write and has a good connect to the other team members, ask them if they want to be responsible for a weekly newsletter
2. Select a few regular sections based on what your team is doing (e.g. project updates, quiz winners, birthdays, outcomes/overview of initiatives that week)
3. Use normal Outlook E-Mail, insert some pictures to make it look nicer
4. Send it out to everyone with consistent frequency (e.g. every Friday afternoon)
5. Let the responsible person give it a personal touch and personal opinion

Weekly Newsletter vol.3 | 3 April 2020

TBLXER'S DIGEST

Your weekly update of "what's going on at tb.lx" while everyone is working from home

Hello there! Is it just me, or is life at home starting to feel a *little* more **normal**?

Don't get me wrong, the world is still far from normal, but **our team is doing very well** and I believe that deserves some **praise**. We adapted in a **fast** and **agile** way, and three weeks later we can really see a difference from when we started the full remote setup.

What we've been up to

We have a new website!
This week we closed an important topic – **our new website is live!** Now the outside world will get a clearer view of **how awesome tb.lx is**. The concept is very **clean** and **simple** and takes off from our focus on **"Real people. Real issues. Real data."** Respectively, each section shows the people and culture of tb.lx, the issues that drive us, and finally, our tech stack. I take this moment to **praise the whole team involved in creating this beauty.**

Grand tb.lx Quizz
On Wednesday, we had the very **first edition of the Grand tb.lx Quizz**. Most questions were based on our knowledge of the **new Guide,** but this was a very fun initiative that **lifted our spirits** during these trying times. Shout out to **Cyril** and **Catarina** for organizing

Implementation of remote initiatives – Heartbeats

What it is:

A monthly retro perspective of the teams of what went well, what didn't and who we are thankful for

How to do it:

Our engineering teams have a retro after each sprint every 2 weeks, where they fill out the *Heartbeats*, our non-engineering teams dedicate half an hour to do their own monthly retro

How do you implement it:

Based on your team setup (size, responsibilities) and your work setup (are retros part of your work anyways?), dedicate time at the end of each month, to look back, within the small teams.

Then find one person who puts it all together and sends all *Heartbeats* to the whole team

MAD / SAD

- Confusing meetings
- Unclarity for team communication / documentation
- Some self-blaming (with performance and demos)
- Better Planning / Estimation
- Urgency of tasks without a well-defined scope
- VPN Slow performance
- Jira tickets unassigned
- K8s explosion

GLAD

- Team atmosphere
- Glad that k8s cluster is alive again, given the team insights for the future.
- Pair-programming sessions.
- End to end tests <3
- A Good focused sprint on delivered value for the GS team
- Starting to know our limits and when to ask for help

KUDOS

- Every person for another month fully remote and delivering above expectations!
- The SRE team and all the others involved in bringing K8 back to life (João F., Daniel, Raphael, Andrei)!
- A round of applause for the PO's (solution focused mindset) :clap:
- The Data Team (Innovation) for delivering so much with so little man power <3

Implementation of remote initiatives – Virtual Lunch/Coffee/Happy Hour

Be an example:
Invite for the first session yourself. We experienced that an Outlook invite works better than announcing it without a dedicated invite on another communication channel. Ask around who wants to invite for the next session

Make it casual:
Take your teams to your kitchen, show them how you cook, tell them about the pictures/magnets hanging on your fridge.
Be clear about the happy hour being outside of your work scope. Have a beer or a glass of wine and cheer to the great achievements over the last weeks and months

Be extra spontaneous:
For a coffee session, instead of knocking on someone's door in the office, just call them spontaneously, turn your video on (always!!) and have a casual coffee chat. Encourage them to do the same with their colleagues.

Implementation of remote initiatives – monthly themes

As a cherry on the top, you can set monthly themes for your initiatives, to make it easier for your team connect to the initiatives and come up with new ones.

E.g. we started with "Mental Health May" and dedicated 2 panel discussions, a book club and an NLP workshop to this topic. June was dedicated to "Sustainability" and we had a documentary club, discussing about maintaining a sustainable diet for both the planet and our health, and a panel discussion on implementing sustainable habits into our daily life's.

How to choose a topic:
Look for a topic which is not only based on your day-to-day work, a topic where your team can engage on a personal level, and have an opinion about.

Implementation of remote initiatives – individual coaching sessions

The internal option:
Does one of your employees have a coaching certification? Or always wanted to do one? Then use the talent you already have!

The external option:
If you are lacking this skill: get external help! Not everyone is comfortable getting external help themselves, the first step of admitting and picking up the phone is the hardest. If it is already offered by their employer, confidential, and only a click on "accept" away, help will be accepted easier.

Implementation of remote initiatives – Bingo

1. Get one picture of everyone (of course, only with their permission)
2. Make a collage of all pictures with the names and add a box to tick it off
3. Send the Bingo Card to your team
4. Implement the rules (you can define them), e.g.
   - For every 1-on-1 talk, tick a box
   - One in a row = Bingo

Important: Give it as an option, not as something mandatory. It shall motivate and remind everyone to pick up the phone every now and then and check in with team mates.
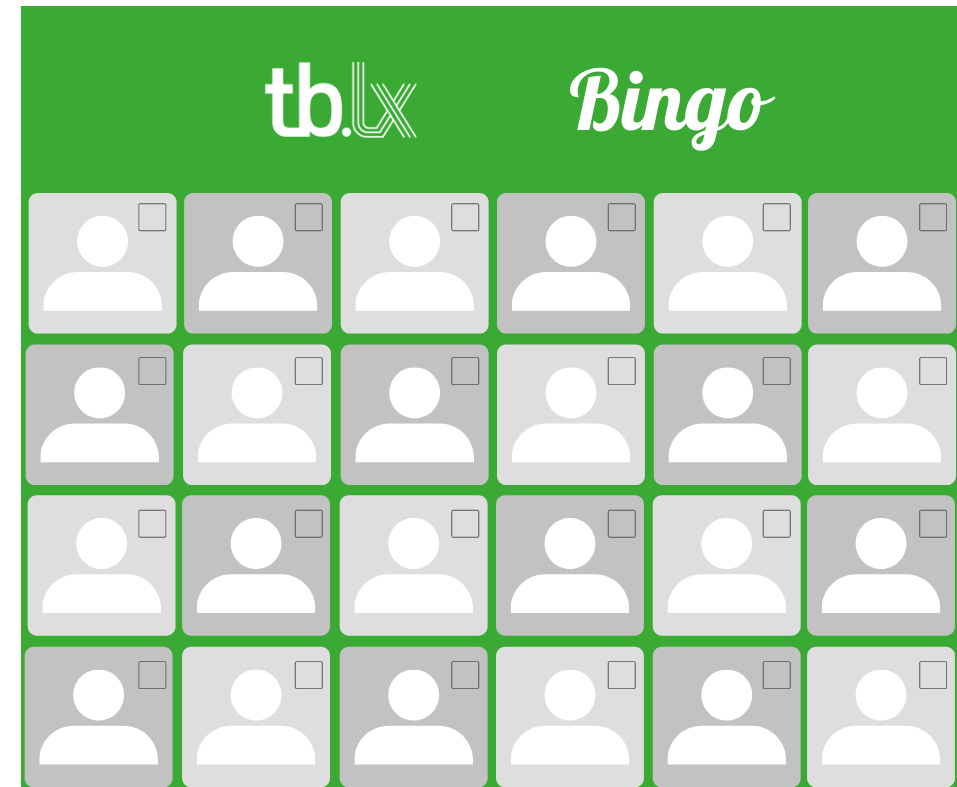
Implementation of remote initiatives – Panel Discussions

Choose a topic
You can link the topic to the monthly theme, if you choose to implement one. If you don't, choose a topic which has potential for a good discussion, where people can share their opinion and ideas.
Some possible topics we used: "Mental Health: how to stay sane during quarantine (new habits, new struggles, new cooking recipes)", "Everyday Sustainability - where and how to make more sustainable choices during your day"

Choose facilitators
Do you have ambassadors within your teams who are passionate about this topic? Ask them to facilitate by starting the discussion with an introduction/a statement/ their thoughts. It can vary between one and three people (we wouldn't recommend more).

Send an invite!
We chose an evening at 6pm after work, to not interfere with work, but also not with dinner time.

Implementation of remote initiatives – Book Club

Choose a topic
Again, you can link the topic to the monthly theme, if you choose to implement one. If you don't, choose a topic which could be interesting and has many book about this. We, for example, chose the topic of "Self-Growth – which books helped you during quarantine" and had presented "Siddhartha", "The big five for life" and "Meditations".

Ask for volunteers
Ask if any of you employees is interesting in sharing, 5 minutes presenting the concepts of the book followed by a 10 minute discussion with the team.

Send an invite!
We chose an evening at 6pm after work, to not interfere with work, but also not with dinner time.

Implementation of remote initiatives – Documentary Club

This one is similar to the Panel discussion, but you start it with a 5 minute info-video (not too long, otherwise no one will find time to watch it). Start the meeting by watching it together and then discuss the topic.

Choose a topic
You can link the topic to the monthly theme, if you choose to implement one. If you don't, choose a topic which has potential for a good discussion, where people can share their opinion and ideas.
We used these two documentaries already to discuss sustainable lifestyle:
The environmental cost of free two-day shipping
The diet that helps fight climate change

Choose one facilitator (or do it yourself)
One person should facilitate by sharing their screen in the beginning to watch the documentary and to come up with a first statement to start the discussion.

Send an invite!
We chose an evening at 6pm after work, to not interfere with work, but also not with dinner time.

Implementation of remote initiatives – Spotify Playlist

This is something you can easily offer, but there are some things to consider:

1. **Set a theme**
You don't want to have a random playlist with too many different genres and no one enjoys listening. Set a topic/a mood and ask people to add their favorite songs

2. Open Spotify, click on "New Playlist", add songs, and share it with your team

Implementation of Contrarian Office Hours

tb.lx

What it is:

It's a biweekly, company-wide informal afterwork space to openly talk about critical topics and come up with solutions for them. The principle is to "address things before they explode", instead of keeping frustrations behind closed doors. Think of it as self-improvement for companies.

Does it really work?

It does, trust me. In the beginning we were also skeptical, it felt like these meetings would result in added work, while some people were reluctant to express their view on things. Progressively, everyone came on board and everyone understands that this is a judgment-free room for listening and for solving real day-to-day issues, rather than a place to be angry and complain.

How to implement:

CEO invites for a regular bi-weekly meeting and hosts it. Over the previous 2 weeks we collect topics in a dedicated MatterMost/Slack channel. The meetings always have a fixed agenda:

- What are the outcomes of the topics and follow-ups discussed last week?
- Which topics do we have for this day, in which order are we discussing and how much time do we give each topic?
- Time boxing! When the time is up for a topic, follow-ups are defined with responsibilities

What were example topics discussed at tb.lx:

"How can we have less meetings?",

"How can use office space more efficiently?",

"The role of the internship program in our company"

"How can we balance our original "delivery-fast" startup mindset with current process-intensive "waterfall" roadmaps?"