



Work From Anywhere:

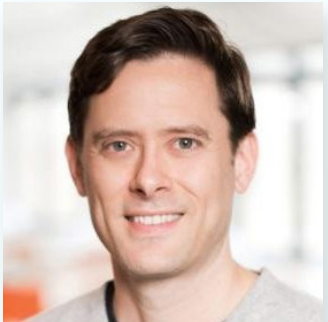
How Trello's leadership team built a thriving hybrid work culture at scale



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Meet the roundtable



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Introduction: The “new” normal

Many things that disappeared in the wake of COVID-19 are slowly (very slowly) returning to normal.

But—wait—what is normal now? Especially for companies that have built upon years, even decades, of a corporate culture that changed overnight with a mass exodus to home offices and living rooms. Where do you go from here, when you have a faction of employees discovering a new productive rhythm without the commute, while others are waiting to head back to the distraction-free sanctity of their dedicated office space?

What does your company look like when people can work from anywhere?

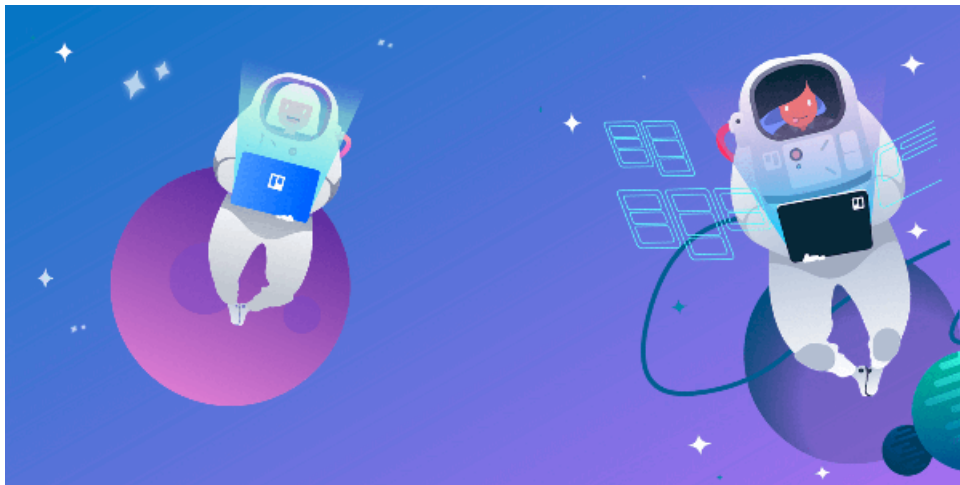


Image: Trello Blog, “How 10 Global Companies Are Approaching Remote Teamwork”

The new strategy being explored by many organizations is **hybrid work**. Recently defined by the [Financial Times](#) as a corporate structure “where employees split their time between the office and home,” the publication notes that it’s “likely to become the norm for many businesses as they emerge from the crisis” of the global pandemic.

The long-term implications of a permanent hybrid work model can open a Pandora’s Box of questions, concerns, and policy adjustments that mean most of

us will get to know a new normal in the workplace. And with this reality in sight, it's time to start preparing how to support a workforce looking for flexibility.

Trello was an early leader in hybrid work, with the first team member to go remote in 2011. But the shift to remote work did not erase Trello's strong office culture. In fact, it created a new structure where face-to-face time in office was highly valued, while teams also connected virtually from around the world with a strong, productive track record.

What follows here is a roundtable discussion with some members of Trello's leadership team about their journey creating a successful hybrid work environment over the past decade—their biggest learnings and best advice for scaling and sustaining a global team while going from incubating startup to enterprise product with over 50 million users worldwide.

Start with the right people

The history of how remote work became an early part of Trello's culture is pretty simple: A valuable employee needed to relocate (to Hawaii, of course), and it was more important to retain them than to require them to work out of New York City headquarters:



“Then gradually, a couple more people went remote and we saw it was working pretty well. There were phenomenal people available to work remotely that weren't in New York. So we kept doing it.”

By 2014, the company started hiring remote employees—including Marketing and Sales leadership positions. Again, this was because the right people were available, just not available in New York..



“I was the first remote leadership hire and at first, I felt like I was missing out by not being at HQ with the rest of the team. My first day on the job, I just logged onto Slack like ‘okay, I’m here.’ We were a startup and didn’t have structured onboarding or anything yet.”

Office culture was still very important to the team, coming out of a way of working developed at Fog Creek, with Joel Spolsky at the helm. There was one important distinction from the typical tech company open office layout—everyone had a private office with a door that closed.



“We were building Fog Creek and the idea was that the team could work in closed offices where they would not be interrupted. This came out of a similar thing Microsoft was doing. At that time, in the late ‘90s, early 2000’s, there was a movement to say that software development is important. So having an office just for software developers and being deliberate about the design was important.

The other component that made it important was that everyone had lunch together. Part of the day was spent doing deep work in your office, part of the day was coming together and talking to each other.”

Based on Joel’s experience at Microsoft, we paid a lot of attention to private offices at Fog Creek. We wanted to reduce interruptions for programmers and allow them to get into the “zone” and accomplish “deep work”.

But we also knew that the social interaction in an office was really important. We had catered lunch at the office so we could all spend a part of our day together. That way we had the best of both worlds.

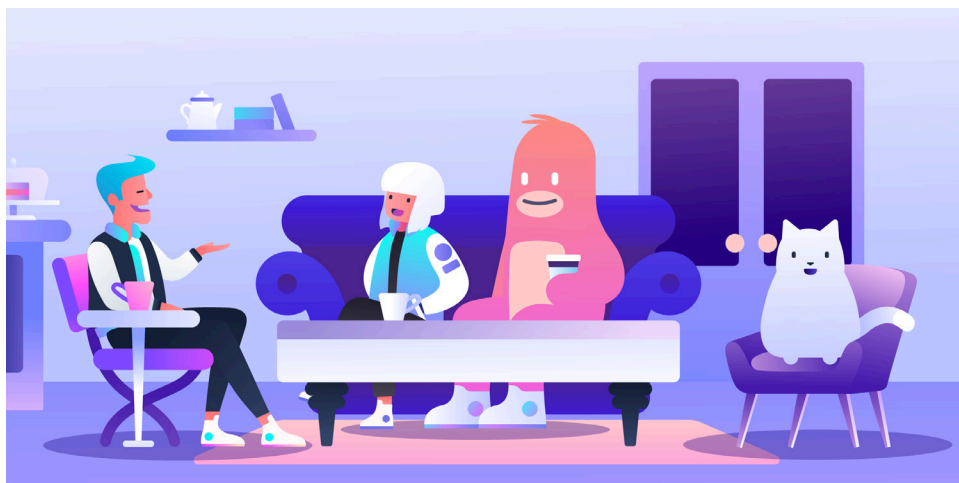


Image: Trello Blog, “Boost Your Team’s Productivity With This Swedish Coffee Break”

Building a hybrid work culture that can be sustained over nearly a decade isn't easy. But the element that makes it seem like a risky strategy for many businesses—the people—is the same one that can unlock its true potential.



“If Trello was restricted to hiring from the NYC talent pool, the product would not be as successful as it is today.”

Trello Tip: Don't overlook the potential of hybrid work because of the inherent risks in diversifying the locations of your workforce. Be intentional of why and for whom you want to hire in certain locations. Talent acquisition and retention can be vastly improved when you offer flexibility when appropriate.

What's your ideal mix?

Humans are geared for social interaction. Recent research has again confirmed findings that we're optimized for the inputs of face-to-face interaction. So how do distributed teams cope with connecting primarily over video? And in a hybrid model, how do teams find a way to build rapport and work together that keeps both remote and in-office participants on an equal footing?



“We're at a stage now where the tools are fantastic. And working remotely, for most of the time, can be super effective. But it's also effective to get people together in-person. It's not that one or the other is the best way to run a company—both have many advantages. You need to ask: What is the mix that's needed, and how often do you need to connect to form the trust that allows you to do great work?”

The mix for Trello can be considered as a magnified version of the structure developed at Trello HQ that provided developers with both closed-door, deep work time and organized social interaction. Part of the year is spent focused on work in private, focused spaces, and part is spent together, socializing and collaborating in person.



“In a pre-COVID world, we found that the hybrid model was the ideal way of working for Trello. When there isn’t a global crisis putting pressure on things, remote work boosts productivity—particularly for makers. But social interaction falls off a cliff. The way we solve for that at Trello is to start off relationships face-to-face, spending an onboarding week in the office with their team.”

In times when employees can travel safely, Trello has standardized a cadence of offsites and office events to ensure teams have the chance to get together in-person and develop the trust needed to carry out effective collaboration back at their home offices:

Onboarding Week: Each new employee is flown to a selected Atlassian office for their first week, and their immediate team also flies in to join them. The week includes standard onboarding activities, as well as social events and planning/education sessions with the team. While the new hire is busy with logistics, the other teammates use it as a time to collaborate in-person.

Team Offsites: A little bit of in-person interaction goes a long way in building connection. Three days of team-building can accomplish a lot of goals, and we ensure the entire team pitches in to plan the trip and book their travel so that it’s inclusive and doesn’t require additional staff to get involved. The cadence is personalized and left to be decided by each manager; it might be annual or quarterly depending on the personality and needs of each team.

Trello Together: Once a year, everyone who works on Trello is invited to an all-product event. Most of the time is spent at a variety of team-building activities, free social time, and many great meals. And we always get everyone together for our one in-person **Town Hall meeting** of the year.

Remote Days: In between co-located events, we host remote-friendly holidays and ways to keep people connected. The right mix might be less high-cost travel and more shared remote experiences!

The mix is not something that is ever finished or perfected—especially when the world has to contend with crises that limit how we can work together. But consider this:



“The ideal model for makers who need to do deep work is to have a dedicated space in their home where they can go and focus. And then spend dedicated time in person with their team in between that work.”

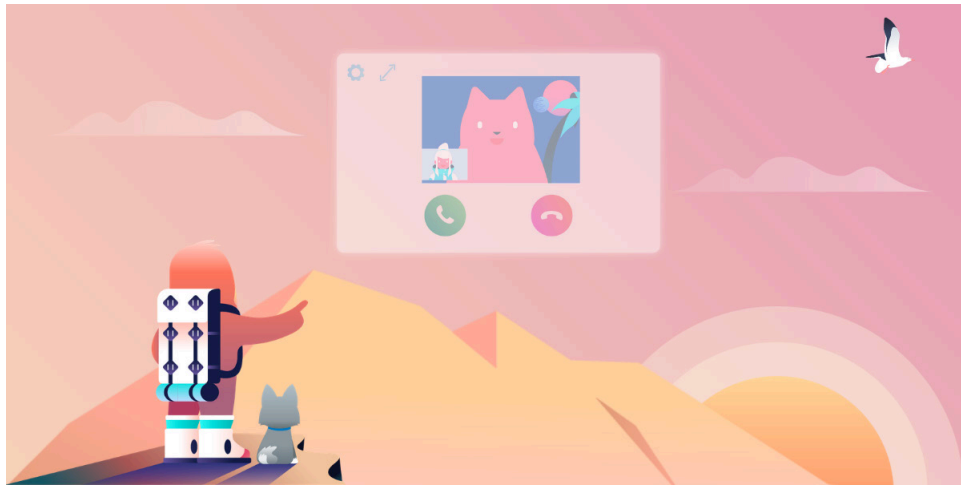


Image: Trello Blog, “[The Secrets To Sustaining A Strong Remote Team](#)”

When you’re colocated in an office, this balance happens on a day-to-day basis. In a remote or hybrid working environment, it scales to a quarterly or bi-annual cadence. How you invest in time and resources will change, but the ROI is the same.

Trello Tip: Look at your existing corporate culture and see which parts can be evolved to serve connection and build trust in a hybrid work environment. The familiarity of the structure will make it easier for your teams to adjust.

Build a hybrid blueprint

Trello has grown enormously, and leadership often looks at the ratio of remote to in-office employees at the company and considers how that split is affecting corporate culture and productivity.

Are there enough developers in the office to mentor interns? Is the talent pool being limited by an intent to hire for a specific office? Despite the best attempts to plan, any company instituting a new, permanent remote work policy will see their teams adjust to their preferred location.



“When we began allowing a few folks to work remotely, we saw a trend of more in-office employees choosing to go remote as well. As other companies come to experience this trend, they may be a bit shocked at just how many people will take that office. One thing to recognize is that, just because colocated employees are excited to go remote, doesn’t mean they’re fully prepared for it. The solution here could be a multi-week trial to test out their readiness and appetite for it.”



Image: Trello Blog, “[Struggling To Focus? How To Be Accountable While Working Remotely](#)”

It’s key to have clear guidelines in place about what a productive at-home workday looks like and how teams are expected to work together. For example, Trello set up the “time zone overlap” rule. Every employee was asked to be

available online from 1-4pm EST to the best of their abilities. This created a shared block of time to set up meetings, get timely responses in Slack and generally have the feeling that people were “around” as they would be in an office.



“There are foundational things that you need. Time zone overlap is a huge one. You don’t want to be constructing highly collaborative teams with too many time zones of difference between them.”

Clear guidelines give each remote worker a sense that they still belong to an office, and are not a free agent with no structure to their day. However, even the time zone rule has evolved as Trello has grown within the Atlassian organization and different departments have been set up:



“In the beginning, it was very organic. But as we grew and hired more people, there had to be more structure and process. And then we grew even more as teams within Atlassian. Individual teams now also have their own distinct remote cultures and processes depending on how those teams are staffed and spread out across time zones.

Be explicit and have a policy so that there’s no ambiguity. It’s about people feeling equitable. There should be a sense that everyone has the same opportunity to access information and connect to other people.

There are no nanny cams or clocks to punch, but management does need to provide a framework upon which teams can build and customize their collaboration guidelines and expectations.



“If you expect these practices to happen informally, they will only get you halfway there in terms of being a part of how the company works successfully. Formalizing is going to greatly help adoption across your team.”

You can get inspired from other leading remote organizations and their policies, but ultimately, each organization should work within guidelines that work best for them.



“Early on, there were people who were interested in pursuing a digital nomad model, where they could travel and work remotely at the same time. We knew this wouldn’t work well for the company given our guidelines and experience, so we encouraged people to take advantage of vacation time to disconnect rather than trying to work and be on vacation.”

But that doesn’t mean the policies stay static. In fact, hybrid models need more active input and experimentation because of the flexible nature of the system.



“As a leadership team, the key to our remote journey was listening. A million different problems will come up. They’re different person to person, company to company. Hearing of every time remote workers feel treated differently than in-office, or vice versa, and making adjustments to ensure everyone knows that an equitable policy is a top priority—that’s what has made it work for the long-term.”

Trello Tip: It’s never too early to start developing guidelines around remote work, and how remote workers should interact with their in-office counterparts. You can get inspired by other companies, such as in [our free guide featuring the top 10 global remote companies](#), but it’s important to test and evolve a process that works best for your unique culture.

Then focus on the infrastructure

When a company goes through digital transformation, they often first try to recreate the physical world they know within their digital tools. New ways of working emerge from there, so long as organizations get comfortable with change.



“Historically, companies have spent a huge amount of money on real estate and fancy offices and now that needs to shift to the employees. They need to be supported. There are a lot of considerations that are new in terms of really setting people up for environments where they can do serious, professional work at home.”

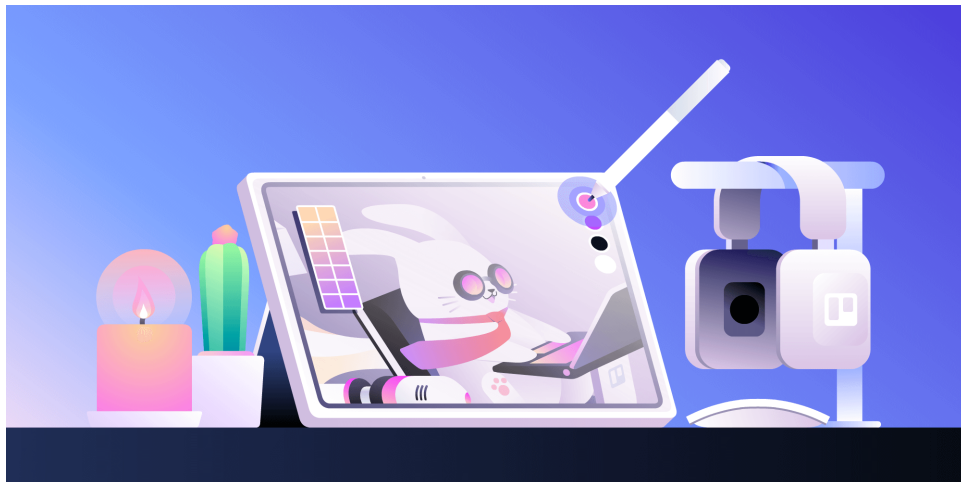


Image: Trello Blog, [“Remote Office Tours: A Look Into 10 Home Setups Of Remote Workers”](#)

At the company level, Atlassian provides all remote workers with a stipend to purchase office furniture and equipment, as well as offers on-going support through stipends for fitness, self-directed learning, and online programs and events. At the team level, rituals are developed to create a digital workplace that all workers can engage with, regardless of their location:



“When a team has the practice of checking in on chat when they arrive in the morning, or when they pop out for lunch, it’s similar to walking by a teammate’s office and seeing them with their door open or closed.”



“You’re reinventing the ritual of going to work, which is a separate place from your home. In the case of remote workers, it might mean the difference between your desk and chair and your bed.”

How you set up your support systems and practices to build a shared workspace, ask: What is the optimal state of work for your teams and how will they achieve that on a regular basis? This question should be inclusive of all employees and their stages of life and circumstances, for example:



“There’s a social component that new grads and interns need and want for their careers to forge professional relationships. It’s easier for them to be mentored in person, as they might be more encouraged to reach out for help if they’re sitting next to their peers and manager.”



“If you take your kids into the office everyday, you’d expect to be able to drop them off at the provided childcare facility and then visit them at lunch. At home, it should be the same expectation that you are not trying to watch your kids and work at the same time, all the time.”

There are still many unsolved problems in the world of hybrid work, and if the model of face-to-face is what your company has historically found to be comfortable, it’s a good starting point for building infrastructure. However, keep an eye on the emergent successes that come from flexible and asynchronous working situations and see how these might improve the old ways. And the best way to start with this is to upgrade the tools you use to work together.

Trello Tip: Start documenting the “rules” that your teams have adopted successfully to work together and adapt them for your new hybrid model. Here are [six hybrid work lessons that Trello learned](#), and then turned in teaching moments for new hires.

Know the roles your tools play

People often ask our team: Was it easier for Trello to adapt to remote work because its business is to be a digital collaboration tool?



“Like many other successful remote companies, we already had a culture of documentation that ensured information didn’t get lost in meeting rooms and hallway conversations. That’s where the toolset comes into play to build a digital workspace.”

There are two components of building a tool stack that will become the shared workspace between remote and in-office employees: Choosing the types of tools, and establishing how they will be used. The latter is arguably more important. For example, Trello focused on trying to preserve culture when collaborating digitally:



“From the very beginning, we were very intentional about the tool usage. We’re also intentional about being human, and being ourselves behind the tools. We thought about how to make the culture very evident through the tools we were using.

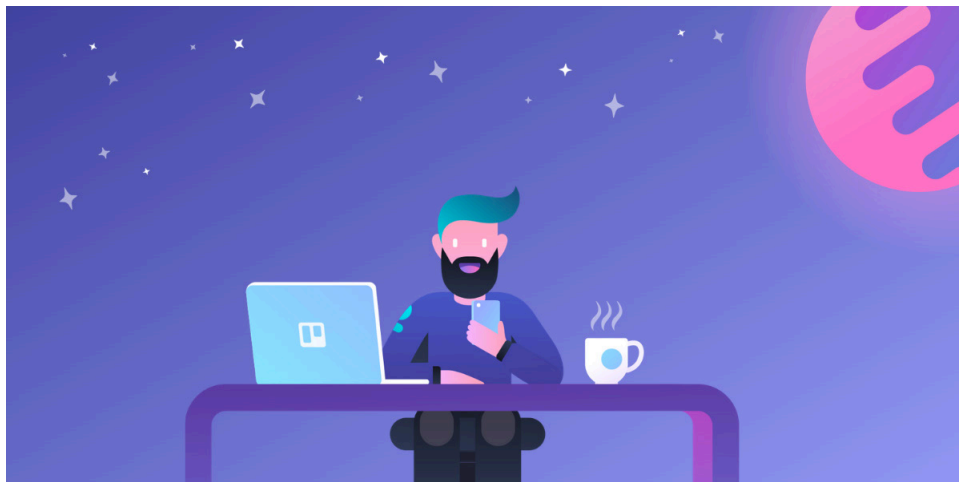


Image: Trello Blog, “[When To Use Which Tools For Remote Work Success](#)”

Conceptualizing how the tools will work together and how they'll function as a digital office will help steer your teams towards particular brands or offerings based on the features that can speak to their collaboration needs:



"I think of these tools as proxies for a disappearing or digitizing workplace. They plug a hole that forms when people aren't physically working together. Eventually these tools need to allow the full richness of human expression that happens face-to-face. That's already happening and there will be more innovation on that side of things, but right now these tools are places to come together and work."

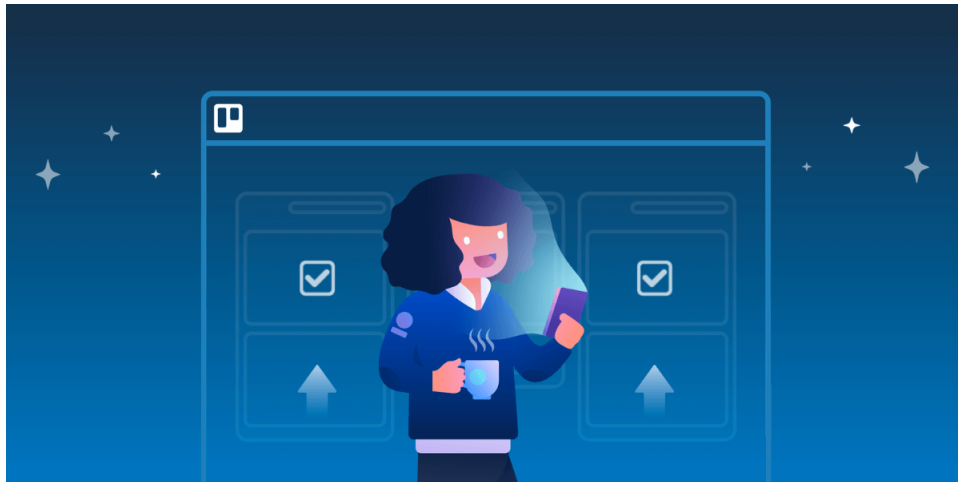


Image: Trello Blog, "[5 Trello Features That Will Change The Way You Work](#)"

Trello as a product naturally formed the basis of the Trello team's digital workplace:



"I think about how we shifted to remote - how we reinvented things that happened in the physical space - then evolved them in the digital space. Trello is flexible enough to create solutions for many different needs and can do so more easily than tools dedicated to solving a specific problem."

However, even as Trello has grown and become part of the Atlassian family of collaboration products, the tool continues to be a core part of the team's stack.

Features like Trello templates have come out of solving for team collaboration needs across the board:



“Teams and enterprises are fluid, growing and changing all the time with new people joining and learning the hybrid work model. A big advantage to Trello is just how easy it is to adopt and use. We’re the same as a lot of our customers, in that we have people who know how to use the tool already, and those who don’t. Getting teams to find value quickly with template solutions is another thing we’re really focused on.”

When choosing the right tools, consider what’s best for your teams to work and also what will allow your company to scale and manage that work successfully.

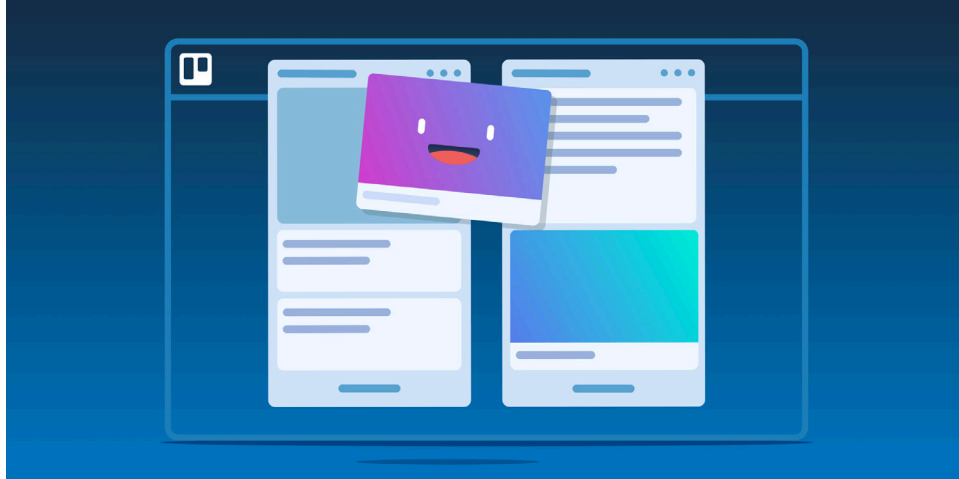


Image: Trello Blog, “[Using Multiple Trello Boards for a Super-Flexible Workflow](#)”

Factors like information security, uptime, and user permissions management will matter to your IT administrators, while features like integrations, automation, and flexibility will keep your teams engaged.



“What type of company personality do you have? How are you going to solve these needs in a way that feels unique to your team, and use tools that share the identity of your group? Trello has filled that hole for a lot of teams who have transitioned to remote and need a place for projects, and team meetings and 1:1s with their managers—all different types of collaboration.”

Doing the work to research and select tools made for digital teamwork is key. Avoid falling back on email and documents because those are the “tools” your teams already have. They are geared for documenting information and sharing it temporarily, but not for making it accessible over the long-term and allowing it to become collaborative work:



“Having that one tool that is familiar and used across all your different departments is really important for the fabric of your company’s collaboration and communication.”

Trello Tip: Your tool stack is now your digital office. Observe what your team needs to work productively as well as how they prefer to get the work done, and find tools that can be used across departments to create a culture of documentation in shared workspaces.

Resources to build hybrid teams

Where do you start from here? Here are a few final pieces of advice from the Trello team for evolving your new remote experiences into a proper hybrid work policy for your company:



“There are no clear ‘five things to do’ to ensure it will be a success. It’s a continuous improvement cycle of listening to folks and understanding how to take action on those inputs. We were open to experimenting with different ideas. Some ideas stuck, others didn’t. It’s fun for everyone to be involved in doing that together.”



“The biggest lesson for companies adopting distributed work for the long-term, is that there’s no default watercooler. If you’re not proactive about it, your company culture is going to take a hit, so invest in the social side of work. Empathy is the key to high-performing teams. As a leader, you are thinking about business impact, but focusing on team bonding and empathy creates the conditions for productivity to happen.”



“Even though the work is primary, people are human. Research shows there has to be trust and a foundation of relationships for teams to excel. So if you want your people to do their best work, they have to feel like they can be themselves at work.”



“We’re here to do a job that’s important. There is a certain amount of humanity and trust that we need. That’s the balance to build as we create great places to work, whether they’re co-located in an office, housed in people’s spare rooms, or otherwise.”

With nearly a decade of experience with hybrid work, Trello has created many actionable resources that can help you create a hybrid work company:

- [How To Embrace Remote Work](#): The complete guide to setting your team up for remote work success.
- [Trello Templates](#): A curated gallery of workflows tried-and-tested by the Trello community, including sections for different departments, team management, and remote work.
- [A Manager's Guide To Distributed Work](#): A 7-step practical guide to leading a team that doesn't sit together in the same office.
- [The Secrets To Sustaining A Remote Team](#): Stella Garber's playbook for helping your remote teams thrive in a post-pandemic distributed world.
- [Transform The Way Your Company Works](#): An on-demand webinar showing how your company can scale work management with Trello Enterprise.

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Trello Enterprise is the flexible work management tool that can scale with your teams as they grow across the world. [Learn more here](#) and request a custom tour for your company.

