Quick Answer: What Team Guidelines Promote Healthy Hybrid Work?

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For many employees, the novelty of working from home has worn off, and there is growing uncertainty about a permanent move to hybrid work. We present some common-sense approaches that organizations can use to combat anxiety around hybrid work, while boosting team unity and efficiencies.

Quick Answer

How do we promote healthy remote teams?

- Encourage interpersonal unity within teams. This can be difficult to maintain in a remote environment.
- Promote transparency around how teams use their time, and show flexibility when coordinating how work gets done.
- Emphasize that team members are responsible for knowing what tools and equipment to use and when.

More Detail

After a year of mandatory work-at-home, most organizations are moving to a permanent hybrid work environment where partial remote work entitlements are broadly extended to the larger workforce. By 2022, 25% of the global knowledge workforce will choose to work from home as their primary workplace, and 45% of the workforce will be working from home two to three days per week.¹ Some teams and individuals are facing the prospect of permanent hybrid work — with feelings mixed between hope and anxiety. One exercise that some organizations have found helpful in reducing anxiety and uncertainty is to establish guidelines for virtual interactions (or “ground rules”) and other aspects of hybrid working. The ground rules should be customized by each team for their own use and updated periodically via team discussions. The team dialogue around ground rules can help to create a sense of agency and control over hybrid working.

These thirteen rules of the road for hybrid work teams will help your teams to adjust. It is important to remember that each organization is unique. Substitutions and changes are encouraged to better align
these rules with your corporate culture. Think of this as more of a template, rather than the final product. Our list breaks down into three categories:

- Team unity and health
- Time management and team coordination
- Tools and equipment

**Team Unity and Health**

- Team members are encouraged to participate in team watercooler events and other community activities. Nonwork topics and interactions are essential for team cohesion as long as discussions are supportive, inclusive and insightful.
- When interacting virtually with teammates, the dress code is informal and video backgrounds do not need to be obscured or replaced. Video presence should be based on individual preference, meeting objective and mood.
- Team members are encouraged to determine their own work/life harmony, creatively blending personal, family and work obligations as long as desired outcomes are met. Team members are encouraged to help others meet their work obligations when needed.
- Team managers are readily available for coaching and support. They can help team members to overcome barriers to personal and team health. Managers and team members will help identify signs that someone is struggling.
- Team managers and executive leadership will prioritize empathetically communicating news and change orders broadly and frequently to ensure that team members feel well-informed about matters that affect them.

**Time Management and Team Coordination**

- Team members can generally set their own work hours and workplace with the assumption that they are able to fully participate in team activities and maintain appropriate work outputs.
- Within those work hours, team members are encouraged to set and publish specific times for individual focus work and for collaborative activities — prioritizing overlapping time zones for collaborative work.
- Team members are not expected or obligated to respond to nonemergency work matters outside of published working hours.
- Team members will collectively determine response times with various collaboration modalities (for example, up to one business day to respond to nonurgent emails, but within two hours in voice and chat).
Team members should agree on the need for, timing, duration and location of in-person team meetings, where collaborative activities will be prioritized. Meetings with remote and in-office team members should strive for equal-opportunity participation where appropriate.

### Tools and Equipment

- Team members must gain minimal levels of proficiency with the standard portfolio of collaboration tools. This ensures effective virtual collaboration. The team should agree upon use of common features such as hashtags and @mentions.
- Team members are obligated to understand and embrace the general guidelines regarding which collaboration tool is most appropriate for the business task at hand.
- Team members must ensure that their remote collaboration set-up — including endpoint device, internet connectivity, sound, lighting and video — are adequate for productive remote collaboration interactions when possible.

### Adapting Guidelines for Your Organization

The pivot to hybrid work is just beginning and most organizations are figuring it out as they go along. These rules of the road are part of this journey, and enable individuals and teams to set their own path while adhering to organizational guidelines. Not only do the guidelines enable co-creation and grassroots innovation of hybrid work, they also help new team members quickly ascertain and embrace team cultural norms. This exercise should also lead to longer-term study of what hybrid work practices are closely associated with high-performing teams.

To further develop their guidelines, organizations should take into account the broader context of each area category:

- **Team unity and health** — These guidelines generally try to encourage interpersonal unity within teams — which has been difficult to maintain in a remote environment. This unity is critical to collective team engagement and inclusion. Explicitly calling out the ability to time-shift — to accommodate a doctor visit, consult with a carpenter, or care for a sick child — reinforces the idea that we are all in this together. Manager empathy and approachability can make the difference between a great employee experience and a not-so-great employee experience — which is why it deserves its own rule. It is critical that managers adhere to the rules of the road. Many team members will get their primary work cues from manager behavior.

- **Time management and team coordination** — These ground rules promote transparency around how teams use their time, agreement around response times, and work time flexibility. The rules also follow the thinking that team gatherings in (corporate-supplied) offices should generally be devoted to collaboration activities. The rules assume that team members are free to choose where they work — home, the office or another place. The idea of "collaboration equity" for remote and in-office meeting participation is raised because there is a growing concern that in-office participants may be favored due to their physical presence in the meeting room.
Tools and equipment — There is a significant message embodied in these three guidelines — that team members are responsible for knowing what tools to use and when. They must know how to use them effectively, and ensure that all equipment is working properly. This idea that employees need to take ownership of their own digital dexterity is an essential ingredient in making hybrid work effective. These ground rules remove the blame-shifting that often occurs when tool and equipment use is inadequate. In return, however, IT must provide clear guidance on what tools to use and when. IT should outline the minimum competencies expected for productivity tools — starting with meeting solutions. The IT organization is also in charge of seamless provisioning equipment and providing effective help desk services. The ground rules also place responsibility on team managers to ensure that no employee is left behind.

Evidence

1 The 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey was fielded in May and July 2020 to 5,000 employees in APAC (Australia, China, India and New Zealand), EMEA (Germany, Ireland, Spain, Switzerland and the U.K.), LATAM (Argentina, Chile and Mexico), and North America (U.S. and Canada). Respondents predominantly worked for organizations employing more than 1,000 people. All industries were eligible for participation. The survey was administered as a web-based survey.

The ideas expressed here about desirable team outcomes are largely based on surveys and models that Gartner has built over the past year. The three primary sources are:

The 2021 Gartner Digital Worker Experience Survey was conducted online during November and December 2020 among 10,080 respondents from the U.S., Europe and APAC. Participants were screened for full-time employment, in organizations with 100 or more employees and required to use digital technology for work purposes. Ages ranged from 18 through 74 years’ old, with quotas and weighting applied for age, gender, region and income, so that results are representative of working country populations.

The 2020 Gartner Employee Engagement Survey was conducted in September 2020 among 5,000 employees in the APAC (Australia, China, India and New Zealand), EMEA (Germany, Spain, and the U.K.), LATAM (Argentina and Brazil), and North America (Canada and the U.S.) regions. Respondents predominantly worked for organizations employing more than 1,000 people. All industries were eligible for participation. The survey was administered as a web-based survey.

The 2020 Gartner ReimagineHR Employee Survey.

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