



DistantJob
REMOTE PLACEMENT AGENCY

AGILE COMMUNICATION: TOOLS AND STRATEGY



Discover detailed strategies and the best tools for setting up a communication structure that will let you implement a flawless Agile process.

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Welcome to a new kind of Agile

The current charter of most distributed company leaders is to create an online workspace (...) supported by a set of tools and self-organizing behaviors.(...)With a strong vision, clear articulation of priorities, and strongly nurturing culture as part of your company DNA, you have a clear path to success on your distributed Agile team." -Amanda Ross, Director of Marketing & Agile Practices at Sococo

It's been called a framework, a philosophy, a methodology - research Agile and you'll find that so many people define it with so many different words that you'd be forgiven for thinking it's some sort of mystical practice involving tarot cards and looking at the stars.

But it's actually a major shift in the way people work, and it's been happening for over a decade - whatever you choose to call it, if you are in the IT business, Agile is likely part of the way you work. If it's not, the time to start is now.

Companies and teams worldwide have used it to deliver better products in record time with maximum efficiency and minimum burnout. If you are unfamiliar with it, take some time to check out our other e-Book "Agile in Remote Teams".

Once you are up to speed, you might be convinced of the benefits of an Agile approach, but still be wondering how to best implement it when part of your workforce is remote - or "distributed", as is more commonly said in Agile vernacular .

That's where this book comes in. Over the next few pages, we'll give you some solid tips on how to build and use a toolkit that will optimize your team's performance, regardless of how many are working remotely.

Establishing Ground Rules

"...(for Agile remote teams. I) have three words: communicate, communicate, and communicate. Because daily in-person conversations are not possible, Agile projects with dislocated scrum teams require unique efforts by everyone working on the project. " - **Mark C. Layton, Principal at Platinum Edge**

Good managers have known for a long time the value of setting a clear, defined vision for a project. An effective team kickoff will set the stage and pace for a whole project and beyond.

Plan a “kickoff meeting”, where you will make sure your whole team, both in-house and remote, knows the following:

- Why they have been brought together, their objectives, their purpose and the company’s goals.
- How should they start; what are the first steps towards those goals.
- Each team member’s responsibilities.
- Who are their dedicated task and team leaders.
- How they should interact with each other to be most effective.
- What tools and processes they will use to communicate with each other.

Establishing these ground rules will allow the team to begin moving towards a collaborative dynamic. The last point is incredibly important - once you have remote workers, your whole team needs to communicate using remote tools.

If they only use the communication tools when they need to reach “the remote guys”, well, that’s a recipe for disaster. The secret sauce to properly integrating and working with all-star remote talent is creating a system where, if you decided you wanted to do away with your office tomorrow, everyone would be able to work from home without a glitch.

You don’t have a home team and a remote team - you have a great team, and some people in it happen to work from the other side of the world.

Stop Dreading Meetings: The Webcam Revolution

"Human communication relies heavily on non-verbal cues. You've already got a language barrier to overcome, and you're talking about complex matters. Don't make it even harder by relying on written or verbal communication." - **David Jantzen, Lead Software Engineer at Navigating Cancer**



"You should use Skype." is the gist of the advice you'll find from "communication experts" if you dig a bit through the internet. Well, duh. It's 2016 and that's the best you can do?

Since Skype was introduced in 2003, we've had thirteen years to work on our long-distance communication skills. "You should use Skype" just doesn't cut it anymore.

You can use Skype - or other, newer, more powerful tools that have since become available, such as Zoho Meeting, Cisco WebEx, or Join.Me - but more importantly than the tool you choose, is knowing how to master it!

Yes, if you are dealing with a single employee and you hit it off well from the start, proving to be a great fit for each other, voice chat will work fine, but when you are handling a project involving several people, the requirements to establish rapport increase exponentially, and this is where video makes a difference.

The old telemarketer adage is that the person on the other side of the line can feel you smiling through the telephone. But seeing is, as they say, believing. If you want to have effective communication - the one essential ingredient for Agile to work - you need to have face time.

Video is crucial for communication, and so it makes sense to understand it, how to use it, and to keep some best practices in mind.

Work it Out in Advance

Don't take stuff working for granted. We may have put a man on the moon, but computers, tablets and smartphones still screw up on an alarmingly regular basis, and tend not to play well with one another.

So for anything over one-on-one communication, have someone in your team prepare everything in advance. Checking audio and video connections is paramount, as well as your internet connection. The day you don't do a test run 10 minutes before the meeting, is the day stuff won't work.

Lead By Example

While Agile de-emphasizes the leader role and strives for a horizontal organization where each team member can pick up the initiative at all times, it still falls to you to set the standard - especially when people in the team are starting out and don't know each other.

Let's say you are conducting your first meeting ever. A good starting point is asking each person to introduce him or herself to the team. But should you just throw it out there? Some people will have a hard time finding the proper words, fearful of over or under-sharing, not sure of how to introduce themselves. Others will drone on and on about their lives.



So what you do is this: you start. Let people know your name, your job, what you are great at, what people can come to you for help with, and some personal tidbit - a hobby, a favorite food, something to make it more human; maybe even tell a funny story as an icebreaker - make it personal, so people start off relaxed. It's really up to you what you want the format of the introduction to be, but just make sure you set a clear form that others can follow.

This should be your mantra every day until you feel the team "gets it": lead by example.

In an Agile approach, your role is that of the Leader-Servant, meaning that it falls to you to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Don't Sacrifice Meetings - Actually, Do More of Them

It might feel a drag to have to setup the video conferencing every day, but it's essential. The minute you start cutting people from your daily Scrum, Agile starts breaking apart.

The same applies to your story writing and estimation meetings. The reason why these techniques work is because the whole team gets to have input.

So bite the bullet, have those webcams (or tablets) ready to go every day, and don't skimp on the meetings.

Your remote daily Scrum should be no different from an in-person stand-up meeting. Make sure everyone is on at the appointed time, and make sure everyone follows the script: usually, what the team member completed yesterday, what the team member will work on today, and a list of items impeding the team member. Again, it's up to you what the script is, but don't push it over three items.

Story writing and estimation meetings should follow a similar pattern. Make sure people take turns, keep it short, and set some video conferencing etiquette rules (suggestions on the following section).

Finally, conduct frequent retrospectives on your communication practices. Invite your remote colleagues to voice their concerns and participate in shaping how the team operates to maximum efficiency.

Encourage People to Adopt Good Video Conference Habits

Don't tap. Does someone have the habit of tapping their fingers or pen? If they do, advise them to stop and put their hands on their lap. Not only can tapping sound annoying to others in general, it can be worse on webcam.

Don't slouch. Just like how good posture gives you a good impression in-person, people should also do this on webcam. Not only is this better for their health, it communicates self-assuredness and confidence.

Don't look down at the camera. You don't want the other person to be looking up at you. If someone is using a laptop webcam, have them raise the laptop so that the webcam is eye-level.

Don't leave other applications running. App notifications make lots of different sounds. During a meeting, you don't want these noises interrupting. Team members should turn off all other applications to avoid these interruptions. And have them keep their cellphones off the table. It can be extremely disruptive if a phone starts vibrating on the table during a meeting - it's surprisingly loud.

Finally, don't multitask. It will be blindingly obvious to everyone in a team when someone is multitasking on video, and it speaks poorly of the respect that person has for their colleagues. Agile meetings are short and high-impact - full attention is required.

The Virtual Office Setup



One of the biggest challenges in remote Agile is avoiding the documentation trap. When a team is distributed, it's easy to get the feeling that you need to double down on documentation so everyone can always get up to speed.

This is fundamentally non-Agile - you need to double down on communication!

Applications have been developed that enhance communication to the point that people can be said to be virtually working in the same space, even if they are miles apart. Synchronous, permanent chat is the most promising of these.

Skype or Google Hangouts are good tools, but they still imply some friction - you still have to schedule a talk, or know if someone is available, actually open the app, do the call... Are you feeling the effort already?

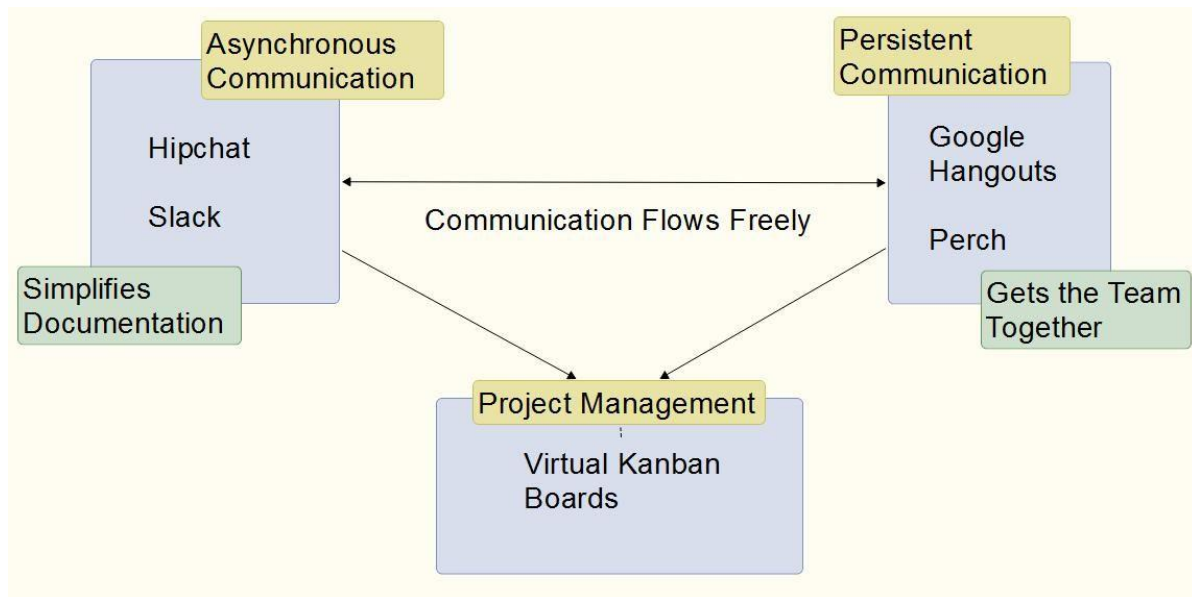
Enter a tool like Slack or Hipchat - a permanent, synchronous, team-wide chat room. An employee starts their workday and logs into Slack, and they're just there - they go about their work but at any point, any team member can ping them on Slack just as he could reach out and tap her shoulder in a shared workspace.

Plus, Slack keeps all the conversation history, so the team can refer back to it

whenever needed. No need for a repeat call if someone forgot to note some details during a Skype conversation. Less time wasted, and no extra documentation - the searchable chat is documentation enough.

A separate room on this chat system, by the way, is also a perfect place to conduct your user story writing and estimation - it's quick, it's clean, and it all gets recorded and can be easily exported.

Of course, let's not forget our earlier mantra: face time is essential. There are a couple of solutions to make it ubiquitous with a distributed team.



The aforementioned Google Hangouts is the staple solution here - industry-leading IT companies such as Stack Exchange use it to simulate a shared workspace, creating multi-user hangouts that run the whole day. If needed, they spin up one-off hangouts for quick video chats for private talks without distracting the rest of the team, but at any point during the day, any team member can see their colleagues through the hangout open on their workstation.

Perch (perch.co) is a really cool tool that lets you mount tablets or laptops across your workspace that act as virtual windows to other people's workspace.

This might seem a bit silly at first, but don't discount the value of being able to look to the side and see your colleagues working on something. Even the more introverted among us need a bit of human interaction. Remote work should be about the ability to focus and avoid distraction, not about isolation.

So now your setup allows for minimal documentation, as all chat exchanges are

recorded and accessible, immediate access to anyone on your team regardless of location, and constant virtual presence. All that's left is to get a structural tool around which you can work out the proper Agile steps - planning your sprints and conducting your retrospectives.

This is where a virtual Kanban board like Trello comes in. This allows for a very visual display where your team can assign, update and re-prioritize tasks according to how you want to conduct your sprints. You can have a board per sprint, and at the end of each sprint, use that board to conduct your retrospective on a card-by-card basis.

Case Study: Stack Exchange's Hybrid Team

Stack Exchange, now one of the world's largest developer communities, started out with four employees, and now has almost two hundred employees under their wing - with half their programming team being remote!

How do they do it? For starters, they maintain persistent Google Hangouts for every team - that way, even though developers might be miles apart, they are simultaneously sharing a virtual room together. At the same time, they complement this using persistent chat services like Campfire or Hipchat, so that they can have shorter conversations or leave a ping for someone that is busy at the moment. This keeps people productive by avoiding interruptions to their immediate work.

They haven't scrapped email, either. Much like in our suggestion in the email section of the e-book, the Stack Exchange teams have a standing rule that all decisions must be typed up and shared with the rest of the team.

Finally, they use a combination of a Trello Board and shared Google Docs for keeping track of who is responsible for what, and easy sharing, editing and revising of notes and designs.



Building and Nurturing Your Remote Team

"Which is easier? Learning a new skill or changing a person's personality?" Who do you think a company is more likely to hire? Would they hire someone who has the skills but is not a cultural fit, or someone who isn't up to par but has the potential to learn and is a cultural fit?" - **Dina Whelan, Agilist, Facilitator, and Tester at CA Technologies**

There's no strategy or method to make up for people with the wrong mindset. The difference between a winning and a losing team often is not up to the amount or quality of tools available; it's not even down to the monetary rewards.

The people that go the extra mile; the people that not only show up with their best work but also actively help their colleagues in presenting their best as well; the people that you want to have in your team - those people have something special driving them: they want to be part of something bigger.

Working remotely doesn't make him or her a hermit. People opt to work remotely so they can be part of a larger hiring pool, so they can live where they choose, and so they can work in the way they feel leads to their best focus and productivity - among many reasons. No-one works remotely because he or she dislikes dealing with human beings.

As you study Agile, you're bound to come across sports terminology, and that's no coincidence. Just like any sports team, a good Agile team relies heavily on interpersonal bonds and familiar relationships between their members. When the going gets tough, as they say, it's good to know your team has your back.

Fortunately - as proven by the proliferation of huge internet communities bounding over everything from flower arrangements to first-person shooter video games - it's perfectly possible to establish and nurture strong bonds remotely. Here are a couple of suggestions to get you started:

The casual chat

Block a section of your team chat room to serve as the “watercooler” room - a place where your team members can post whatever is on their mind. It could be the latest funny cat picture, or they could vent about how much they hated Batman VS Superman.. As people get to know each other’s interests, the team bonding will lead to better communication and result in could even increase productivity.

Whose desk is it?

Employees in distributed teams rarely get to see the desks of their co-workers. Use this as an opportunity to make a game out of it. Ask all of the members of your team to take a photograph of their desk and email it to you. Show each picture to the team and let them talk about what they think about the desk owner. For example, if the desk has sport drinks on it, they can start a conversation about fitness. At the end of the discussion, have them guess who they think is the owner of the desk!



Celebrate special occasions

Make your employees feel special by celebrating special occasions such as birthdays or work anniversaries. Send them small gifts in the mail or e-mail them virtual gift cards. Better yet - plot with your other team members to throw a small surprise webcam party!

A mugshot is worth a thousand words

Encourage people to fully personalize their profiles across all your tools. Having someone's picture accompanying a message, email or kanban post will ultimately lead to a high increase in empathy and engagement.

The Fly-In

Depending on your budget and remote worker location, you could consider flying your remote members in for an initial meeting. This will both make them feel more valued and kick off their interaction with the rest of the team on a very positive note - research shows that our attitude to someone over long-distance communication is worlds better if we have broken bread with them at least once before.

In practice, this might not be feasible for you - and that's ok. The previous tips are more than enough to make sure your remote employees become part of the family.

Best Email Practices

"When there were 4 people, everyone knew everything. When there are 75 people that no longer scales. So you have to work out your channels of communication, and that's doubly true with remote workers because you can't rely on overheard conversations or gossip to spread the word. You have to force yourself to be explicit in communication." - **David Fullerton, VP of Engineering at Stack Overflow**

Over the last few years people have piled on email, to the point where there are whole books decrying its use in businesses - or training people on how to avoid using it as much as possible.

Email is certainly not the most Agile tool, but it's still alive and kicking and has a place in our toolkit. People are very used to - and comfortable with - email.

Don't use email if you need an immediate response, of course. Do use it for communicating status updates and decisions. Consider making it a rule that all decisions must be typed up and shared with the rest of the team via email - this will make email work as a database of sorts, one keeping everyone on the same page.

Know when to escalate communication: as a rule of thumb, email should be used to share information, not to conduct a dialogue. Any of the tools mentioned in the previous chapters are better for this kind of communication.

If you have to have a conversation via email (and you shouldn't!), establish a two-email limit on the number of emails in a discussion thread. If after the second email, people still don't understand what is asked or said, propose a video chat.

Finally, make liberal use of tools that help you track when emails are received, opened, and have their links clicked. [Bananatag](#) is a great option that integrates very well with most email solutions.

Case Study: RES Software's Three Remote Offices

RES Software is a Netherlands-based software company devoted to creating virtual workspace solutions. Predictably, they believe that good software development can be both Agile and work with remote teams.

They wanted to increase their team in order to increase output. But they couldn't find the people they wanted in the Netherlands. So they went to Romania. Today, they have three international offices - the two mentioned earlier, and an extra one in the United States.

RES conducts all its meetings using webcams - no exceptions. Their former Senior Director Software Development, Ralph van Roosmalen - now an Agile coach at Philips - established that doing an Agile retrospective without live video was not an option. This meant discipline and preparation: as we stated in the second section of this e-book, the team got in 5 minutes early to prepare everything, so the meetings started on time and without a hitch.

The management at RES also made it a point to nurture remote talent evenly, and make it clear that remote Agile is a challenge, but one they'll gladly take on. As Roosmalen puts it during an interview:

"We set out to make our teams in two locations as equal as possible. When we have a party in the Netherlands, we also celebrate in Romania. When we go out to dinner in the Netherlands, we also go out for dinner in Romania. We also made it clear to our teams in the beginning, [Hey guys, the tools will not be perfect from day one. We will have some problems with Skype, Link, whatever we're going to use. But give us time and we will try to improve.]"

Agile Can Thrive With Remote Teams

"(...) if I had to work with a dislocated team, I would consider using only an Agile approach because an Agile approach allows me to see working functionality much sooner and limits the risk of misunderstandings(...)" - Mark C. Layton, chair for the Agile Leadership Network



Don't believe the naysayers. Agile as a methodology thrives when communication flows effortlessly and the teams have the right mindset.

And both things are easily achievable with remote employees - we hope this e-book has helped shed some light on what is possible.

Try the tips, tools and strategies provided in this e-book. You'll like the results!

Let Us Know How We Can Help!

Curious about how to better implement Agile practices with your distributed teams? Get in touch at contact@distantjob.com and we will be delighted to provide you with additional information!

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